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Frontier Stories

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FOR more than an hour two soldiers with their mounts behind them had watched from the crest of a tamarack-covered hill, motionless, tensed with waiting, each so much a part of the brush that an eagle soared close to their heads before rising with a startled beat of wings.

"What can you make of it, Gin'rel—Injuns?" Trooper Tom Judy turned from the man at his side and squinted one good eye down the ridge.

The other eye, his left, was missing, an empty socket remaining wide open in the wrinkles of his leather-browned face. Not that he gave a cuss, for it was just one more tale added to his long list of those gathered wherever the Army had entered into frontier fights.

"Gin'rel," he repeated, "what can you make of it now?"

The other man shifted the glasses through which he was sighting.

"Not much, can you?" the other replied. "Else why'd I ask ye!"

Friends of Captain Kirk Mallory had often wondered why, on graduating from West Point, he had chosen for his orderly the hardest-looking scoundrel to be found in his new post down on the Mexican frontier.

Captain Kirk himself knew exactly the reason, for at that time he was a fighter on maps only, with no experience in the field. He foresaw what the old scar-breast could teach him, and their years of trailing together had not split the comradship which had sprung up forthwith.

Presently, lowering the glasses, he gazed for some time across the scene of hills and valleys that rolled far off into a dim blue distance. There was the look of a cavalier about his trim boots, leather jacket, and blue woolen breeches striped at each side with the gold braid of his rank. And there was usually more respect gained than lost in the cocked angle given to the wide

brim of his campaign hat, set on thick, dark hair.

It was Indian Territory upon which he stood, the Territory in all its brilliant spring cover of sumac, oak and walnut, shot with patches of many-colored flowers. Peace seemed everywhere. He thought, as his gaze swept northward to the rim of sky where lay Missouri and the home-folks, that surely there was no danger nor death in all those glorious miles. Yet every red flower, he knew, might well mean a drop of human blood.

"I can't see a thing now," he said "Let's wait a little longer. I'm certain that dust was not from the wind."

Trooper Tom squatted on his haunches. "Suits me, Gin'rel."

Kirk turned to him, frowning. "Don't call me general. Some day you'll do that in front of Kearny himself. Isn't captain good enough?"

"No, lad, it ain't! Whose fault is it you can't be callin' yourself a gin'rel, or colonel anyways, this minute?"

Kirk shrugged. "My time's coming. The major was wise enough to leave the army, but all trails lead west. We'll meet."

Tom turned away, mumbling. But the words he began ended abruptly, as from his squatting position he pulled Kirk down. "Look!"

A lone horseman had mounted to an opposite ridge. The distance was more than a mile, yet both man and beast stood out clearly against the late afternoon sky. This one was joined by another, then more, until a group had gathered. Kirk trained the glasses on them.

"They're Osage, Tom."

He saw the Indians wheel suddenly into line, sweep down the slope and vanish into the depths below. His glance followed them to the canyon, to pause at a certain spot.

There was no need of aided vision now. With the thing once located he could see by naked eyes what had drawn the Osage attack. A wagon train was coming up the bottom. If scouts rode in advance they were not visible at this distance, for the train seemed without guards.

Trooper had also found them.

"The fools! Look at the lead one—'way ahead—just askin' for trouble. It ain't right, though. Osages are friendly.

His voice was lost to Kirk, who was already in his saddle.

"Come on, Tom. Something is wrong. If we keep off the ridge we may get there in time."

Down on the canyon floor he saw the way was unchoked by brush, yet here the shadows of evening had already fallen. It was dusk by the time he swept around a bend, to wheel back at a sight beyond.

A wagon came charging toward him. His fleeting glimpse showed a woman on the seat, lashing the horses into greater speed, though the outfit swayed dangerously on the uneven road.

Two brown forms raced out of the trees behind the wagon. They came on together, then separated, one swinging from his mount to the wagon box, the other riding ahead to check the running horses.

"Take the first," Kirk snapped. "I'll get the one on back. Ride 'em down. Don't shoot if you can help it."

In a jumbled flash of canyon walls, beasts and men, Kirk saw Trooper Tom at his side for an instant as they rode upon the wagon, saw the old fellow plunge down to the figure at the horses' heads, and himself leaped from stirrup to box as the wagon halted.

There was not much daylight beneath the canvas top. Dimly as he landed inside on hands and knees he made out a flutter of white clothes, some robes in a pile on the floor, then a painted Indian hurtling toward him.

He sprang to his feet, braced for the shock, saw an upraised knife and struck it down with his pistol butt.

Kirk fell back as his revolver loosened in his grip, spun to the boards. A brown hand reached to grasp it; he crushed the fingers with his boot-heel, caught the bowed back in his arms as strength came with a rush that turned muscles to iron.

Slowly he bent the red man downward, one boot-heel still clamped on the outstretched hand. The body yielded. The Indian's breath choked, became a gasp.

Kirk shifted the position. His free foot trod on the pile of skins. They moved, a muffled scream seeping from beneath.

"Dane! Dane!"

A white form fluttered up in the dark, instantly silenced as a last desperate lunge of the Indian sent both men over the tail-

board of the wagon. They lay stunned on the ground, their arms relaxed, Kirk dazed by the fall, the Indian already spent in the fight. Neither heard the yell that broke from in front.

"Gin'rel! Be-God, it's Sittin' Eagle, our friend from Pawhusky Wallow!"

Trooper Tom came running back, an Osage with him, both halting when they saw the motionless forms.

"Just knocked out," was Tom's verdict.

A girl's face peered over the tailboard, blanched against hair of gold, her gaze sent down with mingled fear and wonder. It was this head that Kirk first saw on opening his eyes.

He closed them instantly, an incredible thought breaking with the dawn of consciousness. Heaven? An angel standing at the gate?

He looked again. One colorless orb glared into his.

"GIN'REL," said Trooper Tom, "it's Sittin' Eagle. He says his party has got a wagon train, and there's a woman on the front seat of this outfit bellerin' fer God knows what. Eagle's lookin' fer a horse thief, that's all, but there's sure murder bein' done back yonder."

Kirk sat up, dizzy from a blow on his head.

"You talk to Eagle. Tell him he'd better call off his tribe, if he wants to keep out of big trouble."

The night whirled before him when he rose to his feet and he stood leaning against the wagon box. Trooper Tom grasped his arm.

"Stay here, Gin'rel. This wagon needs help. I'll ride down with Eagle and this other."

The second Osage rose unsteadily as Tom spoke a few words in sign talk, aided by army curses. A rattle of gunfire came from the canyon.

"Hurry!" Kirk ordered. "I'll bring this outfit back to meet you at the train."

He turned his attention to the wagon. The girl had vanished, and an older woman peered out between the cover flaps.

"Sho, now, stranger," this one said, breathlessly, "you happened along at the right time. I hope your soldier hurries. Pa's back there. Saints alive, who'd a thought we'd have Osages agin' us?"

"It isn't right," Kirk admitted, his words sounding far off as numbness came again. "Can you drive—or shall I? They may need me. . . ."

Then he fainted. The jolt on the back of the neck had got him.

"Betty!" the woman called. "Betty!"

The girl appeared beneath the top and together they lifted the injured man onto a pallet of skins.

"Ease his head from the jolts, Betty. Take it on your lap."

While the older woman turned the horses and drove in search of the train, the girl poured water into the palm of one hand, bathing the stranger's head.

Darkness hid him from her. She could only recall his face as she had seen it in that moment of struggle with the Osage. He was young. She knew this as her hand touched a beardless cheek. Thank God he had come! Her fingers again found his brow. Though he lay motionless, she felt comforted.

For some time she sat in the one position, until, bending down, she made out the face in her lap. The soldier's eyes were open, staring up through the dim light into her own. She withdrew her hand quickly, calling: "Mother Grant! Your medicine! Let me drive."

"You'll have to pound these critters' tails if you do," Ma Grant answered. "Come along."

She found a square bottle, sniffed it, then held it out to him.

"Pull hearty," she offered. "It's good for ye."

Kirk obeyed, pulled long, gasped.

"Lord!"

He sat up. There was no pain now, no weakness, all the forces in his body were concentrated on the stuff in his stomach; sassafras, swamp-root, ginger, rum—lots of rum that burned like fire.

Then he saw a sight through the front opening of the wagon that snapped him back into order. They had approached the junction of two canyons. Here on the flat of the fork the Indians had made their attack.

"Where's my horse?" he asked, crawling to the end board.

"Trailin' us."

He dropped to the ground and caught the animal. At once he saw what con-

fusion there had been in the flat, with no system, no preparation for a fight. Wagons were scattered or bunched in groups, only a few showing any attempt to form into the protection of a square.

Effects of the attack were marked by a huddle of terrified women and two dead horses lying with their bellies stuck with arrows. But now the fighting had ceased.

Kirk rode to a group of Indians gathered in the trees on the canyon slope, where Trooper Tom's campaign had nodded above the feathered crests. He approached slowly, one hand on the butt of his gun.

"It's all right, Gin'rel," Tom sung out. "I've had a pow with Sittin' Eagle. Someone shot an Osage just out of Leavenworth and these bucks follered the train because horse tracks pointed this way. They ain't found their man, but you know a Injun. They gotta have blood fer blood, says Eagle.

Kirk nodded, swung from his mount, and stood looking back upon the wagon group. His hand touched Trooper Tom.

"Look." He pointed to the huddle of women, some standing, some kneeling, one stretched on the ground in their midst. "That means death, Tom. Some poor woman was killed. Tell Sitting Eagle his revenge is taken."

Tom spoke to the Indians. They, too, looked, standing motionless until Sitting Eagle signed that they should go. Presently the band moved into the trees. Then came the tattoo of their horses as they vanished into the night.

"Let's go down," said Kirk.

A group of men met them at the wagon line. Kirk dismounted among them and stood with one hand resting on his saddle.

"Who's leader here?"

"I be, Cap'n. Nathan Grant from Leavenworth." The speaker stepped forward, extending his hand. He was a tall, straight figure in spite of the many years of toil behind him. His chin was bearded, with a line of gray stubble that ran into the thatch over his ears.

"Where are you headed, Grant?" Kirk asked, accepting the greeting.

"Californy."

"What!"

"Californy. Eighty families, tradin' goods. . . ."

"Hold on," Kirk cut in, an experienced eye running over the disorganized caravan. "You can tell me later. Now you'd better get your outfit bedded before dark." He looked straight at the other man. "Is this your first train?"

"Yup. But me and Ma has done a heap of movin' ourselves. Once from Illinois, then from Kentucky, then. . . ."

"Never mind. Tell me that later, too. Close your wagons in a square, tongue to pole, picket your stock outside—they look half dead—get some campfires going to cheer the women. Excuse me if I give orders, but that's my job. I'm Captain Mallory, First Dragoons, at present with a roving commission that says all I have to do is look for stray trouble. It seems I've found some. Now let's get busy."

A queer smile passed over Grant's face, a flicker of rebellion at what seemed the impudence of the younger man.

There was another who also stared sharply, to gaze with puzzled eyes at the sound of the soldier's name. He squinted hard through the dusk, but stepped back when Kirk looked toward him. As there was no sign of recognition his boldness returned.

"Nate," he began, "I for one say we don't need all this army fuss. Don't we bed down tonight as usual—every camp to its own choosing?"

Kirk, still leaning at ease with one hand on his saddle, surveyed the speaker.

"Are you in charge of this train?"

The man's mouth curved in a sneer. "No, but I suppose you are."

"Yes, for tonight I am."

Grant stepped between them.

"You, Pitt, close in the wagons. We'll do now as Captain Mallory says. Ain't it enough we lose a day's march and one of our women, without you bringin' up a rumpus?"

As the one called Pitt turned away, Kirk looked at him keenly, and in the moment of passing knew this argument was not ended. More than that, the name had struck him suddenly tense.

"Trooper," he called, when the gathering broke up.

"Right here, Gin'rel."

"See that things are put in shape. I'm going to Grant's wagon for a little talk."

"Feelin' trim again?" Tom asked in a

low voice. "Are ye sure ye're wide awake?"

Kirk nodded. "Did you hear that name, too? Do you think it can be the major? He's grown a mustache. I'm not sure, are you?"

"Else why'd I ask ye! That's Passing Pitt, or I'm blind complete."

II

SIX months before this Osage attack a military court-martial had been convened in Fort Leavenworth to pass judgment upon one of the army's officers. The officer was Captain Kirk Mallory, and though he had been returned from the Mexican campaign under a cloud of dishonor, he stood in the front of the body of stern-faced men confident that his case would be cleared.

It was mid-afternoon on the last day of his trial. Officers of the court shifted impatiently. He was tired of it. They too, seemed tired of it. Everyone concerned appeared to want the thing over with. Yet the president held out until the last detail of evidence was given.

"On the night of November tenth," he asked, "did you lead a detachment of twenty men into a sector known as Devil's Gorge?"

"I did," Kirk answered.

"And you knew it was occupied by one hundred Mexicans, fully armed?"

"Yes."

"And in your own judgment you were leading men to certain death?"

"But I had been ordered—"

"That is not the court's question!"

Kirk was silenced. The president picked up a sheet of paper, reading to the court: "On the night of November tenth, then, Captain Kirk Mallory, having taken twenty men into Devil's Gorge against his own judgment, which in an emergency is the first rule that should govern an officer's action, lost nineteen of those men, returning himself and with one other only."

So was his case summed up. The court had heard all the other circumstances, all, he thought bitterly, except the one fact which he seemed prohibited from entering upon the records. That was how, on the night before the fatal rush, he had received word from a Major Pitt that he would be held personally accountable for any failure of his attempt to push through. Had he known then that the order came from a man whom soldiers in the ranks had already termed, "Passing Pitt," he would have used his own judgment to better advantage.

Now he realized the name was justly given. Pitt had passed the blame for that night's failure to him, adding to it a charge that he was unfit to be an officer and criminally responsible for the loss of nineteen lives.

The fact that the major had retired from active service when the armistice allowed him to do so, was proof enough, Kirk thought, of the man's desire to slip from court-martial himself. But the court members seemed of another mind.

He heard his name called and stood ready for their verdict. The president's voice broke an interval of silence.

"You have been found guilty of conduct unworthy of an officer. Recommended to be relieved of your present post, recommended further that punishment be imposed according to the will of this court's president."

The man, a colonel in rank, gazed across the table. Kirk surveyed him coolly and steadily.

"Captain Mallory, your previous record is good. It shows your work as a scout with the Army of the West was excellent. In view of these facts my recommendation is this: You have been relieved of your post by the court. I cannot change that. But I can allow you to retain your rank, unattached to any organization, and I can return you to your earlier work in the Santa Fe country. This is for one year only—one year to prove the finding of this court right or wrong. It has judged you incompetent."

Kirk listened unmoved, and when the president had finished asked but a single question.

"You will allow me one man?"

"Yes."

"Then I want that man to be Trooper Tom Judy, who went with me through Devil's Gorge."

Thus Kirk emerged from trial still a captain, with one soldier in his command. His roving commission carried him south and west, scouting in advance of all army movements. Yet always there was some-

thing else in his plans. He sought news of Pitt.

"Gone to Santa Fe," was the first rumor he heard. Then later from a friend coming out of Missouri, "Pitt's headed to California."

This last must be true. Kirk felt almost certain that Passing Pitt was here with the train, though he had seen him but once, in the dusk of twilight an hour before Devil's Gorge.

* * * *

AS he went on to the leader's wagon he saw most of the men were hard at their delayed job of bedding down for the night. Soon wagons were closing up, until a Santa Fe block grew out of their boxes halted end to end.

Horses were picketed beyond the lines and cows hobbled out to graze, while fires lighted within the square made the white tops stand gaunt against the darkness. The blaze was cheerful, yet there were no songs that usually rose from a train, and he realized the camp was silent in the presence of death.

A girl was sitting alone on the tongue of the Grant wagon, staring into the coals of a fire, when he advanced out of the night. She started up with a short cry of surprise.

She was pretty; he had determined that earlier in the day; but sitting there on the wagon tongue, her head bowed upon one hand, the braids of her yellow hair falling across her rounded breast, she had a woman's appeal and more. She had the strong-bodied, confident bearing of pioneer stock.

He had watched her first with a smile, then with frowning eyes as he noted her depression.

He smiled again, advancing.

"Did I frighten you? I'm sorry. Don't stand up. You look nice enough perched on the wagon like that."

"Then throw another stick on the fire, Mister Soldier," she answered, meeting him with a little laugh, "and perhaps you can see me better."

Kirk obeyed, pleasantly aware that here was a girl of the right sort. Not afraid to give a man talk for talk.

"I came to see Nathan Grant," he said, crossing to stand before her. "Is he here?"

"No. But I expect he'll be back any minute. He's gone to the burying with mother."

Kirk leaned against the wagon wheel, looking down.

"Poor woman. It's a shame she had to go like that."

"Why 'poor woman'?" the girl asked. "She is safe—and happy now. There's no endless road ahead of her, no sorrow, no heart-breaking days and days. Oh, I shouldn't talk this way, should I?"

"No," Kirk agreed. "It's bad to feel like that so soon. You have hardly started, if you're going clear to California with your father."

"Nathan Grant isn't my father. My name is Betty Asher."

"With your mother, then."

"I only call her that because she has raised me."

"No relation? Well, then, if they're not your family, why are you going West?"

Betty looked up, her head tilted back until the firelight danced in her eyes and revealed every curve of an unhappy face.

"I'm goin, Captain, because I must."

"A woman's answer," Kirk laughed, "which may mean anything."

"Yes," the girl answered, "or nothing at all."

An interval of silence fell between them, moments wherein Kirk found no answer to his puzzled thoughts. He had not been deaf to the words this girl had cried above him as he had regained consciousness back there in the afternoon. They returned now. She had been pleading, calling, yet not for him: "Dane! Oh, Dane!"

Before either spoke again the tramp of footsteps nearby prompted both to glance toward the square. A man strode into the ring of fire.

"Betty!"

She jumped up. Pitt walked to her.

"So this is why you aren't with the other women." The bite in his words was not for her alone. "Ma Grant wants you. Come."

He placed her hand on the bend of his arm, turned with her, then stopped.

"You'll excuse my fiancée, Captain. Sorry to take her from such pleasant company."

Kirk stiffened at the taunt, saw Betty's face grow crimson, and knew Pitt was holding her hand on his arm by sheer

force. The next moment the pair had vanished into the night.

Half blind with rage, goaded by an old hatred and a new-born jealousy, Kirk glowered at the vacant blankness. Fiancée! She, promised to that man, that cur!

Here was the one of her pleading call; Pitt, Passing Pitt, the one man in all the Southwest he hated. How could she love him? She couldn't! Yet she did, for she went with him now, and was going West because of him. Promised in marriage?

Again Kirk's rage flared. He had felt the touch of her hands. She had drawn him to her side; if with no more than the appeal of her troubled face. And Pitt. . . .

His fury was still brewing when Grant reached the wagon.

"Betty said you were waiting to see me, Captain."

Kirk was silent. When he spoke his voice was calm.

"Yes, Grant, I want to know what you plan on doing."

"Same as usual. We'll hit the road again tomorrow."

"Then you'll have to make a change. You're just heading for sure death as it is."

Nate frowned. "I reckon we can get along, Captain. My men'll be more on the lookout for trouble after today's doin's. We weren't expectin' trouble in Osage country."

"Trouble is in every country, Grant, and you're not fixed to meet it. You have no guides, no scouts, no system. You can't go on like this."

"Who says so."

"I do."

The old pioneer's eyes squinted close under gray brows.

"Just who in hell d'ye be, anyways?"

"Those are government orders. Trains without proper escort cannot go on to Santa Fe. There's still a war in New Mexico. Your unprotected outfit would simply invite trouble and end what peace the armistice is giving us. Understand?"

"Well, Captain, what are you offerin'? We ain't turnin' around." Grant shot a wry smile from under his hatbrim. "Maybe you can give us the escort of scouts and guides."

"Yes," Kirk answered, "I can."

The idea had already come into his mind. There were now two definite reasons why he would like to join the train.

"Yourself and the one-eyed Johnny?" Grant asked. "Meanin' no disrespect ner such, but I don't see as how a couple of men added to the train is goin' to work no miracle."

Kirk gave his answer solemnly.

"When you take on Trooper Tom, you take on a regiment. He knows every man in the Southwest, white, red and Mex. He'll lead you with his talk where guns would fail. But I won't argue, Grant. Go back and get an escort from the troops in Leavenworth, or give me charge of your train."

For some time Grant brooded. From Illinois to Kentucky, from Kentucky to Missouri; he could go plumb to Californy likewise on his own judgment. Damned, orderin' young squirt! At last he wagged his head.

"It ain't for me to decide, entire. I'll have to get a vote. How far do you aim to take us?"

"To Santa Fe. Perhaps clear through . . . depending."

"Dependin' on what?"

"Several things. God and the devil mostly."

Grant eyed the soldier with disapproval.

"You're a onreligious cuss now. I guess the army does that, too."

Kirk would have asked what else the army did, but other voices interrupted him.

"Sho', Mister Judy! Is it a fact?"

"Else why'd I tell ye, ma'am!"

The two men rose from their seats by the wagons as a trio of figures appeared from the camp square; Trooper Tom and Ma Grant, with Betty walking between them. It was evident that Tom had already found a friend in the big-hearted woman, as who did not? They talked and laughed like neighbors at an old-time reunion.

"Would you believe the likes of this, Nate—he knew my sister Jenny! Well, it's a small world, ain't it? Deary me, it's like bein' back in Illinois, talkin' to you this way. Seems a shame you're leavin'. We might know lots of folks."

"Don't fret, Ma," Grant advised her. "Captain Mallory has offered himself and his army to go along with us."

"Saints alive! Will you, Captain? I'll

bake a pan of my best corn muffins come a Thursday every week."

Kirk laughed and thanked the woman, but his eyes were not upon her. In the fleeting moment when the news was given he saw a look of approval sweep across Betty Asher's face. The expression vanished the instant she saw him looking at her.

"If we must have the train's vote," he said to Grant, "let's get it now. Trooper, call out the men in those wagons across the square. I'll go along this side."

III

THERE was one wagon in the train which had not been driven among those that formed the square. It stood at an angle near one corner like the tail of a Q, close enough for protection yet far enough for secrecy.

This outfit was different from the rest because its box rode on springs instead of resting on the axle trees, and because of the high board walls and roof instead of the bows and canvas. It could be entered only through a door at the rear, above which was the sign: "Howe and Green—Liquor and Games."

Why not! Nathan Grant was moving a settlement. A traveling saloon went along as naturally as the Gospel Wagon, Doctor Sharpe, or the one with benches, where children learned their three R's as they jolted west.

Inside, a table for cards and one with a roulette wheel stood against the wall, while at the front end was a bar, rows of copper mugs taking the place of glasses.

Four men were seated at the table, Pitt, "Dude" Dunham, and the two proprietors. Mugs of liquor occupied the space between them, for a game was not in progress. They were silent, sinister in their glowering looks, each hunched on his seat, neither drinking nor speaking, absorbed in his own thoughts.

Pitt straightened first, and swallowing the whiskey at a gulp, crashed the mug on the table.

"You're a fool, Dude! A damned, brainless, muddle-headed ass!"

His voice rang hard, with the confident scorn of a man who knows he has the fighting edge on any others present.

"You're a fool," he repeated, "and you know it. Why did you bring that horse here?"

Dunham raised his head, his eyes glowering across the table.

"Had to get here somehow. I borrowed a horse to catch up with you, sure. Maybe I killed a damned Osage. What of it?" He paused, a purposeful grin coming across his mouth. "But don't you talk to me, Major. Shall I tell something? Want me to talk back?"

Pitt calmed, scowling malevolently at the gambler. Dunham laughed aloud.

"I thought that would do it. But look here, we're all four together. Why not tell Greene and Howe right off that you've got a little personal deal to settle? There's one man in the Southwest you don't want to meet, and here he comes riding into camp and saves the train. Pitt, we'll throw in with you and you throw in with us. In return for one smart young captain laid to rest, you can work our business from the inside by finding out just what Grant has in his cargo."

"And after that?" Pitt asked. "Suppose you learn what he's got, have you any plan?"

"Leave it to me." Dunham smiled at the group. "I figure there will be considerable money lost over this card table. Then a mutiny won't be hard to manage. Who'll want to go west when they're broke? Gentlemen, we'll have this train to ourselves before Santa Fe—about twenty thousand dollars' worth of tradeable goods. I've a friend down there who'll take the stuff from us and ask no questions. Easy, I'd say."

Greene, the short, fat bartender, chuckled with a heave of his paunch and a crinkle of lines on a red face.

"Not so bad, Dude. If there's liquor in the wagons I can sell it for fifty a quart."

His partner also approved, but with less enthusiasm, for Jake Howe was more of a true frontiersman than a scoundrel. But hard times had touched him heavily.

"I'm willin'," was all he said "Twenty thousand dollars is a heap of money."

Dunham reached over to tap his arm.

"Twenty thousand and then some. There's an iron box in Grant's cargo. How do I know? What do you think I was

doing when the train was shooting at Indians? That box has gold or I'm a liar."

A puzzled expression came over Pitt's face. He knew Grant had no wealth; the old man had spent his pile on store goods. Then a thought flashed through his mind that sent his fists to the table. If there was gold in Grant's wagon it belonged to Betty. He sprang to his feet.

"One thing, Dude. I'll throw in with you but we'll leave the Grant outfit alone because of the girl. Understand?"

"Oh, sit down," Dunham jeered. "Take a drink. Calm yourself. We won't touch your girl."

"And you won't touch that wagon, or we split right here."

"Oh, no, we don't, mister. You need us. How about your army man?"

"I need none of your help in that!"

Dunham shrugged wisely.

"All right, Pitt. Go ahead and try him. Then come back to us. The place will still be open."

Pitt slumped to his chair, his head propped on his arms. The saloon wagon turned strangely quiet after the heated play of words. From beyond the walls a new sound broke the night.

"Roll out, Johnnies, roll out! There's a meetin' round the fire."

Someone rapped on the door. Dunham opened it. Trooper Tom's face appeared in the lamplight.

"We've got a meetin'. . . ."

"Oh, go to hell, soldier!"

Dunham slammed the door, stepping back into the wagon. A muttered oath came from outside. It turned to a snarl of rage. The next instant the four men were confronted with a thing that held them motionless as the old warrior charged through the wood panels, flinging pieces of the shattered door from his chest as he stopped beyond the threshold, his glare fixed through a stream of blood.

"Roll out!" he bellowed. "Else why'd I ask ye? Roll out, damn ut!"

Pitt alone rose to meet the enraged trooper.

"As you were, there! What's the meeting about?"

"Come an' learn ut," Tom spat. "They're takin' a vote."

Pitt nodded. "All right, we'll come." He turned to the others. "If it's a vote on something, we'd better have our say."

Glowering his one-eyed defiance, Tom retreated from the wagon as the four men strapped on their guns and followed into the square.

A log fire burned in the center of the enclosed space, its flames leaping above the heads of the men who stood nearby. Children took advantage of the light to play at games around the line of wagons. Up the canyonside twin points of green or yellow blinked in reflection, as cats from the hills and prairie wolves stared at the intruders.

Soon the group was seated in a half-circle beyond the heat of the fire. More than one hundred and fifty men were there in that camp beyond the Missouri jump-off. Old and young; faces that were hard and sullen, set with eyes turned hard from looking upon a life-time of unrewarded toil; faces of others alight with hope, carefree, defiant, with never a thought for the morrow as long as there was a dance or a drink or a fight today.

The learned and the untaught sat side by side, men who were separated by different positions back there in the cities; striking up strange friendships now, all drawn together by one interest, one aim, the New West.

A few women had come out of curiosity, or to advise their mates. They had no vote themselves. It was Nate Grant who stood before the throng, bareheaded, his gray hair waved by the evening breeze.

Kirk was some distance behind him, almost in the shadows. He remained there purposely to give the older man the first word. After all it was Grant's train, and Grant was the rightful leader.

"It seems we've run agin' the government," the pioneer began, "and we've got to do some swappin' around before we can go on to Santa Fe. I reckoned I could move we-all to Californy myself, and since Dane Pitt says he went there once with the soldiers, I sort of thought we'd get along. But Captain Mallory says we're unprepared."

A difference of opinion greeted this. Some in the group nodded, others scoffed.

"He says we've either got to turn back," Grant continued, "or go on under escort."

"Whose escort?" a voice called out. All eyes turned to where Pitt stood with arms

folded across his chest, a sneer on his face.

"Why, Captain says he'll go."

Rancorous laughter burst from Pitt and his three followers. Grant waved to the figure behind his back.

"Perhaps the Captain had better have his say."

Kirk walked into the firelight, his glance sweeping around the circle of men but ignoring Pitt.

"There's not much that you don't already know for yourselves," he began. "You must realize what might have happened this afternoon—and remember, the Osages are friends. When you strike Pawnee country you'll know what a real Indian fight means. After that you have Mexicans.

"The war isn't over. There's an armistice, but I'll tell you now it's far from real peace. I know Colonel Kearny is leading his dragoons into New Mexico. We can't start trouble before he's set. The Mexicans couldn't resist an unprotected outfit like this one of yours.

"Don't you see? If it's war again, and the United States loses the strip of land from Santa Fe to the Pacific, what's the use of you men going on to California? So take it easy. Don't blunder along."

From the expression of many faces Kirk knew that at least part of the train was on his side.

"Even if you do get by the Indians and Mexicans," he added, "you've started on a march that is almost impossible. There's no wagon road beyond Santa Fe, only a trail where scout troops passed two years ago. Perhaps you can make it, but you'll need every man and brute you've got.

"I crossed that country once with Carson's dragoons. If you try it with wagons you'll need every trick the Southwest knows; in other words you had better take advantage of what the army has learned." Kirk paused, his gaze now full on Pitt. "From the way things went this afternoon, I wouldn't suppose there was even an ex-soldier in the train."

For some time there was a brooding silence around the circle, broken by low mutterings as the farmers talked among themselves. Presently one man, a lank, stern-faced fellow, rose to speak. His voice came slowly, ponderously.

"I allow yore right, Cap'n. As she lays now we-alls just headed for to git our har lifted. My name's Jeb Dayley. I ain't got much throwed inter this train—jest one wagon—but I don't aim to give it to ary Injun nor Mexican nuther. I move the motion, boys, that we ask Cap'n to bring on his troops an' escort us plumb to Californy, ef so he likes."

Dayley took his seat, resumed his chew of tobacco. Kirk looked at him with sudden friendliness.

"Whatever it is you want in California, I hope you get it!"

A movement at one side of the gathering drew his glance in that direction. Pitt was shoving his way to the front.

"Before there's a second to Jeb Dayley's motion I'd like to ask the Captain something."

"Let's hear it," Kirk agreed.

"Dayley said 'troops.' Is that right?"

A laconic smile flickered across Kirk's eyes, to vanish at once as he turned a hardened gaze on the other man.

"It is," he answered. "I offer the escort of cavalry, infantry, artillery, scout, guide, wildcat, and man-killer. His name is Trooper Tom Judy."

A rumble of laughter went around the circle. Pitt's face blazed red in the firelight.

"Sit down!" a voice scoffed. "Ye've got yer answer!"

Jeb Dayley rose again.

"I'll change my motion, sayin' ask cap'n to bring on his Trooper Tom. Didn't we see him handle Injuns? Hooray fer Californy!"

His spirit carried to others. Grant stepped up to call for a vote.

"All in favor of Jeb's motion stand on the right. All agin it on the left."

There was a shifting of places, men going to their chosen sides of the fire. A group gathered quickly on the right, but more slowly on the left. Pitt and Dunham were seen walking among those who hesitated, until presently both right and left seemed equal.

"Count heads," Grant ordered.

"How about yourself?"

He hesitated. "I reckon I'm neuter. I'll go with the bunch."

The count showed a majority of fifteen in Kirk's favor.

"Well, then," Grant announced, "I'll stick by the train's choice of leaders. From now on we'll do as the Captain says."

The two sides soon mingled, those who had voted against the escort seemingly just as well satisfied with the way things had gone. They had been undecided in the first place and were easily convinced now.

But there were four who did not join the others. Kirk, standing lost in his future plans, became aware that Pitt, with the three at his back, was staring across at him. He caught the man's eye and held it.

Pitt advanced, his voice coming loud enough for all to hear.

"I suppose you'll try to make soldiers of us, Captain?"

"We'll march with system, if that's what you mean."

"Well, let's understand one thing. We didn't join the army!"

"But you'll take army orders, for you're in war territory now." Kirk walked nearer. "That's only the first reason, Pitt. As you said, let's understand one thing. I've been voted in charge of this train. If you object you can leave it."

The two men had drawn close together, surrounded by the rest, who were quick to recognize the note of warning in their new leader's voice.

"What do you say?" Kirk snapped.

"I say you can go to hell . . . you and your lord-of-all army stuff! I'll not get out of the train, and I for one will do as I damn please!"

Grim glances passed around the group of men. Here was an open challenge, a mutiny at the start. Only one thing could follow now, for the custom of the wagon trail was as hard as the custom of the sea. In a train or aboard ship a captain who could not handle his crew would never go far.

Suddenly the little group opened up, leaving a cleared space of ground flooded with firelight. In the center of it two forms stood rigid through a tense, lingering moment. It was man to man.

IV

"PITT, suppose we settle it here and now."

Both Kirk and Pitt were soon stripped to breeches and boots. They stood in the center of the half-ring, the line of men on one side, the fire on the other, their eyes locked across the short intervening space. Trooper Tom was at Kirk's back, while Dunham crouched behind Pitt, though seconds were seldom needed in a battle of this sort.

There were no rules, no limit to time or punishment. It was a fight of primitive men.

As the two tensed, measuring each other in the red glow, they seemed well matched What advantage Kirk gained in condition he lost in his slight build. He was lithe, firm-bodied, muscular, but would not weigh within forty pounds of Pitt, who now showed the full strength of his heavy shoulders and arms.

The moment of study ended. They thudded together, clawing for holds, legs braced. Another dull thud, as of two buffalo bulls struck in the death lock. Then a hail of blows.

Pitt gave back, blood streaming from his lips, his face livid with rage; Kirk followed him, crouching, tensed for a leap that would carry him under the other's guard. That forward lunge was checked in mid air as Pitt hurtled down on the lighter figure, crushing him backward to the ground.

Half recovering as he fell, Kirk swept his arm around the charging body. Locked in a mutual grip they rolled together, each grasping for a throat hold. They were no longer men but fiends of hate, snarling, breathing in gasps, choked by the dust where they groveled.

Through a quarter of an hour neither could rise to his feet. Then in a moment of advantage Kirk flung himself on top. As he lay with his head drawn down he panted in Pitt's ear: "Now Major Pitt, Passing Pitt, do you know me? Know what I'm here for?"

His words loosed a flood of strength in the other man, a final superhuman rush of power. A shout of warning came from those who watched as they saw the pair suddenly roll nearer the embers of the fire, yet none stood up to intervene.

Kirk felt the heat of flames on his back. One of Pitt's arms seemed to relax behind him. It tightened instantly again, bearing down on Kirk's skin with the bite of fire. He fought it off, an uncontrollable

gasp of pain rushing from his swollen lips.

His effort rolled Pitt toward the watchers. Almost one with the move, the bark of a dragoon revolver broke across the ring. Pitt weakened with the report. Kirk tore himself away.

Through half-blind eyes he saw a twig with a burning end lying where it had been shot from the other's hand. He caught a glimpse of Trooper Tom standing with gun drawn.

Then Pitt leaped to his feet, crouched, ape-like, his face no longer that of a sane man.

"So that's what you want?" Kirk said hoarsely. "An open fight, eh? Anything goes!"

Pitt's eyes gave answer: "Kill me or I'll kill you!"

They were not two paces from the fire when they staggered into a lock. Those who watched sprang up, their hands clenched, each fighting that battle himself.

They saw Pitt give back a step under the first rush, his foot close to the blaze. Kirk was in front, the stronger now, carried on by his greater endurance, bending him backward further and ever nearer to the flames.

Came a moment when it seemed Pitt must give in or fall on that furnace below. Already the odor of his scorched leather boots filled the air.

Like melting tallow his legs bent beneath him. His body relaxed, dropping down toward the bed of fire. Yet not a word of surrender came from his parted lips. He stared up, defiant, unyielding in his mad hate.

Many thoughts flashed through Kirk's mind during the moment he held an enemy's life in his two hands. Among them only one stood out. He could carry this thing no further.

Whirling backward, he sent Pitt in a heap to the ground and staggered away, dazed, exhausted, hearing none of the shouts of approval or disappointment that greeted his act.

Trooper Tom appeared beside him, offering his jacket as he muttered:

"You bleatin' fool, why didn't ye let 'im drop! An easy end to the damned coyote—and ye saves his yellow hide! What in seven kinds of hell—"

Kirk turned on him wearily.

"Shut up, Tom. I couldn't kill a skunk that way. And I want Pitt—for a reason you don't know. Go back and tell the trainmen we move tomorrow. I'll meet you in our camp."

Kirk found his way across the square, going toward his own blanket roll beyond the wagon line.

Many eyes watched; men who remained at the fire and women also peeping from their tents. He saw none of them until he recognized Betty Asher. He hesitated, not wishing to appear before her battered and bloody from the fight.

She waited on the path where he must go to reach his camp. He drew nearer, to stop again abruptly at the look of displeasure on her face.

"I'm sorry," he apologized, and was not certain why. "I hope you didn't watch."

"Why shouldn't I watch?" the girl demanded. "Now I know what brutes men are—nothing but brutes!"

Kirk lifted his head, meeting her gaze squarely.

"But what else could I have done? What other way is there?"

"Oh none, of course. It just *had* to be brutal. I suppose the Army does that, too."

This last was delivered almost with despair. The girl turned with a little cry to vanish beneath the wagon top.

Kirk stared after her, his pain forgotten. Again those bitter words against the Army—against himself.

As he passed on through the wagon lines, the indefinable warmth of feeling he had begun to glean from the presence of Betty Asher cooled within him. The night's victory seemed nothing at all.

V

"Boots an' saddles, boots an' saddles
Boots an' saddles I say;
Boots an' saddles, boots an' saddles
Roll out, it's breakin' day!"

THE notes from Trooper Tom's bugle fell on a sleeping camp. He stood at the up-canyon side of the wagon square with his face turned into the dawn, splitting the wilderness with his call.

It was a battered old relic of a bugle, with a blatant tone calculated to rouse men cursing and in a fighting mood. Trooper

Tom enjoyed it; not the sound but the effect. He blew with a full-chested vigor that sent "boots and saddles" shrieking into every ear along the train.

He was on his fifth repetition before anyone moved. Then Nate Grant came from a bunk beneath his wagon, scowling as he approached.

"Do we need all the racket?"

Trooper lowered the bugle, sqinting at the other man out of his lone eye.

"Else why'd I be doin' ut!"

"It won't be sun-up for an hour," Grant objected. "That's our usual hitching time."

"Gin'rel's orders."

"Orders be damned! This is my train; I'm still leader, even if we have taken on an escort."

Trooper nodded. "But you're a man of reason, Grant, though ye be contrary as an old mule. When we pull out of these hills we'll find hot travelin' yonder on the plains, and we won't do much movin' at mid day. Trailin' in the southwest is different from any other place. We've been there—the Gin'rel an' me."

"Where's Captain Mallory?" Grant asked.

"Rode off half hour ago lookin' fer trouble."

"Looking for it. Haven't we enough without finding more?"

Trooper grinned. "If he knows aforehand where she is he can go around her. I taught 'im that."

Grant said nothing, turned, and strode back to his wagon.

By this time the occupants of other wagons had climbed to the ground, the men getting feed for their horses, women preparing food for the men.

With his bugle under one arm Trooper Tom went along the line of breakfast fires, meeting frowns with a grin, explaining to the families as he had to Grant the reason for this early call, until, even if there were many who cursed him as he passed on, they did it with some respect.

At sunrise Kirk came riding down the canyon. He drew in his horse for a moment's survey when still some distance above camp. There was a flush beneath the tan of his face, as with head up, hat pushed back, he breathed his fill of the dawn.

To him this was the greatest joy in living. Refreshed from a night's sleep, early into the saddle, sunrise painting the hill slopes with splashes of color—the start of a new day with all things ahead unknown. Going on again, he swung to the lope of his horse, humming a snatch of song.

Riding first into Grant's camp he found the family at a breakfast set on the lowered tailboard of the wagon.

"All the comforts of home, Mother Grant!" he laughed, dismounting to join the group. "Griddle cakes, cornbread, molasses and butter. I'll bet you put sugar in your coffee, too!"

The woman chuckled aloud. Betty, beside her, smiled. Nate stood up to greet him.

"There may be something in favor of this early morning start, Captain, but I wish you'd smash that infernal bugle. We can make the camp without it."

"How? It's the best time-saver I know."

"Are we so rushed for time?" Grant asked. "It's only April."

Kirk dropped the reins of his horse and stepped closer.

"We are, Grant. No use alarming the camp by telling them this, but I have just come from talking with an Osage. He said the Pawnee painted their faces in the hunting dance last month. That means they'll make war on the white man as well as hunt buffalo. A thousand of them are soon going to gather at the Little Arkansas, to meet a herd of animals coming up from the south. We'll have to beat them to Pawnee Fort . . . that's a stockade on the west bank big enough to hold all of the train, if we can reach it. I think we can, but one week is the most we should give ourselves to make it from here to the crossing."

Unwilling to make things seem any more hopeless, Kirk did not say he was gambling also with the river itself. The ford might be in flood. He could only leave that to chance.

Nate accepted the news in silence. It was Ma Grant who spoke first.

"Saints alive! Never mind them Injuns. Captain must be plumb empty. Won't you set and eat?"

"Had my breakfast two hours ago, Mother. Thanks just the same."

Kirk hesitated, groping in his mind for some excuse to speak with Betty Asher.

She had not looked at him after the first momentary smile.

He turned abruptly to his horse.

"I won't see you until night, Grant. My position is not with the train but ahead of it."

The old man nodded. He was glum as the soldier rode away. His wife regarded him curiously.

"Ain't feelin' so friendly this morning? And you Betty, you didn't have a single word for the captain."

"Well you had a-plenty for the two of us," Nate growled. "The high-handed young pup, bossin' me and callin' you Mother! Don't see why you cotton to him so."

"Now you're just riled because he wants to protect this train. He knows the trail and we don't. Why not admit it?"

Grant looked steadily across the breakfast board.

"Ma, you know well's I do why he's joinin' himself on with us. And you know why he fought last night. Twarn't over a matter of mutiny entire. It's over our Betty, and I guess her good instinct has told her what I've learned by hearsay. He can escort us, but that's all."

"What did you hear?" Betty demanded. "What about him? Tell me!"

Grant's frown became a look of surprise.

"He's been in Mexico, runnin' wild and loose, and ain't fit for your sort." He swung defiantly to his wife, pointing a spoon at her. "Thar now!"

She returned his gaze silently for a moment. Ma Grant would argue with Nate but not dispute his word, for he was honest. What he said, he had heard from some good source and believed. Yet she could not believe it.

"Sho' now, Captain Mallory has all the looks of a gentleman."

"You can cover any old boot with polish," Grant quoted, "but it won't wear." A flood of sunlight struck between the canyon walls. He finished breakfast and started at once to harness his mules. "He may be a rake with women, but we'll follow his advice about those Pawnee ahead."

His deep voice carried across the wagons and down to the boys bringing in a herd of stock.

"String's a-movin'!"

Soon horses were saddled, mules hitched. The square formed once more into a single line that wound up the canyon bottom and onto the prairie above.

NIGHT, a little more than a week later, found them camped within the enclosure at Pawnee Fort. The whole caravan was gathered behind the ten-foot post walls, the wagons lined in their usual square formation, mules feeding in the center.

At one side was a well dug to reach water at the level of the Little Arkansas, flowing nearby. With plenty of food the train could stand a long siege. But Kirk had no plans for that. They would fight it out.

He sat his horse beyond the walls, waiting for word from Trooper Tom. That evening five Pawnee had wandered into camp, pretending friendship, yet showing by the fact that they were afoot that their true purpose was to count the train's numbers.

The ruse was an old one. Kirk had sent Trooper behind them to learn where the main body was hidden. Now, after some hours, Tom had not returned. The camp seemed strangely quiet, men and the families trying to gain a little rest before the attack they expected at dawn.

One light burned across the square. Dismounting, Kirk walked through the gate toward it. It was in a shelter Nate Grant had erected beside his wagon. He met the old man coming out.

"Well, captain, I guess we're to thank you for getting us here on time."

Kirk felt praise enough in the words, but they were uttered without friendliness. Having offered them, Grant walked on to another outfit.

VI

THAT dawn on the banks of the Little Arkansas furnished more than one campfire tale for travelers who came later along the road to Santa Fe.

They told how two hundred men and women held themselves against the Pawnee attack that broke like a wave from the bank of trees and swept to the very walls of the enclosure; how on one side the Indians gained the top, and leaped within to meet the white men hand to hand; how the ground turned red in that turmoil,

twenty crosses blazed into the poles of the stockade marking the graves of Missourians who fell.

It was past mid-afternoon when Kirk, firing through a gun-notch near the stockade gate, discovered the attackers had retreated into the woods.

He scowled across the open ground. A trick? The Pawnee wanted to lead the trainmen out? Well, they would have their wish when Trooper Tom brought his report.

Not many minutes later, like an answer to Kirk's thoughts, a crash of brush echoed from down-stream; a lone horseman broke through the cover and charged into the clearing. It was old Tom, his mount lathered, himself hatless, his voice a bellow:

"Open up!"

Kirk leaped to the gate, loosened the bars, swinging it on iron hinges while Tom came on, his flight unchecked. He flashed by, a hail of arrows flicking the dust behind him. Men sprang to help Kirk. Together they closed the opening.

Behind them Trooper Tom raced halfway across the enclosure before he could draw rein. Kirk ran to meet him.

"They're comin' Gin'rel! Mount the men. I followed 'em all last night. This is not the main tribe—just those that have come first. They're gatherin' now in the willows for a bunched rush."

Peering between the poles Kirk substantiated Tom's report. The patch of willows that grew northward along this western side of the river was trembling as if in a strong wind, though the calm air of evening had already settled into the valley, but not a Pawnee was in sight. When they came it would be in a solid mass calculated to carry them over the walls by sheer strength of numbers.

"To your horses!" Kirk shouted. "Mule drivers stay with the train; use your rifles from on top."

He swung to his saddle and turned to see these orders carried out. Trooper Tom drew in beside him. Knee to knee they rode to the gate. Kirk spoke calmly to the men who fell into line.

"It will be work at short range for us when we get started. Wait until the Pawnee leaves his cover, then meet him halfway. Pick your man and get him. Here! Crowd in close. Go through like a shot. Spread out when you hit the open." He paused, glancing at a look-out stationed at a rifle-notch. "Tell us when they break from the trees. Pistols ready, men?"

A dragoon revolver hung from his own right hand, its long barrel resting across his thigh. His left hand drew back on the reins as the horse beneath him, trembling, rubbed its distended nostrils against the gate beams.

"Easy boy," Kirk soothed. "Just a minute now."

Trooper shifted in his seat.

"How ye feelin', Gin'rel?"

"All set for hell'n leather."

"Just like that time below the Rio, ain't it? D'ye remember how we were awaitin' there, knowin' half of us wouldn't be worth coyote feed in two jerks—"

"Pawnee! Pawnee!"

The lookout's warning rose to a scream. Two men at the gate dropped the bars, leaping away as the press of horsemen burst through. Shouts, the thunder of hoofs, a rattle of rifle fire from the stockade wall shattered the hush of twilight.

The riders poured into the clearing to spread at once in line formation.

Ahead, a compact brown wedge came hurtling from the willows. Even as the point of it left the shelter, the leading Pawnee plunged from his horse, brought down by one of the men on the stockade wall.

The pioneers were deadly marksmen. With only their eyes above the poles, they aimed deliberately, fired when their bead covered a Pawnee heart, reloaded and fired again.

The charge thinned before these rifles. There was little left of the bunched attack by the time the two mounted groups met.

Pistols at close range gave the last blow needed to stampede the Indians. They turned, leaving a field of dead.

Horses with empty saddles wandered over the clearing, or ran with heads up, blowing through blood-flecked nostrils.

The stockade gate was opened again while figures stumbled inside.

Kirk, halted up-stream from the enclosure where the retreat had left him with apparently no more to do, sat peering

through the dusk in search of Trooper Tom. They had been separated at the beginning of the rush.

Presently he saw Tom riding at a lope from a thicket some distance up the river. Kirk frowned, reading a sign of trouble in Tom's lone ride, and spurred ahead for the news. Trooper gave no explanation.

"Scrap all over, Gin'rel?" he asked, casually. "Sweet an' short, but they made a damn good start."

"What were you doing?" Kirk asked. "Where have you been?"

Tom shrugged, looking beyond his captain to where the last of the farmers were being taken from the field.

"Just lookin' fer a skunk," he offered, "but he got away."

Kirk's eyes followed down along the soldier's leg. Abruptly he halted.

"For God's sake. You're hit! Why didn't you say so?"

Tom's squint came faintly out of the dusk.

"Because I aim to settle this myself. I got a bullet hole in the leg. Weren't no guns in the Pawnee outfit. Only one rifle in sight at the time. I didn't see 'em shoot, but I know Pitt tried to drop me."

"Pitt!" Kirk exploded. "I'll get that. . . .

"Gin'rel!" Tom snapped the word as a command before Kirk could ride away. "Ye'll do nothing. So far I've held out, it bein' your fight and your girl. But this makes it mine. Sabe? From now on *I'm* settlin' with Pitt."

VII

THAT night only a circle of dogs kept watch around the white men's stockade. The men themselves, spent from past days' marches and the Pawnee battle, dropped fully dressed beneath their wagons.

The enclosure turned silent as death. Outside the fighting was renewed as coyotes, drawn by the scent of dead horses, were met by dogs. Through the dark hours the creatures of the wilderness and those of civilization carried on the war their human masters had begun.

So the night passed. At dawn "boots and saddles" roused the families from deadened sleep. They came from their wagons with lagging steps. Breakfast worked its miracle. Strengthened by slabs of pork, cornbread and pots of coffee, they again took up the march to Santa Fe.

A rear-guard watched the Pawnee camp, sighting only a band of a few who followed at some distance. Even these stopped when the belt of willow growth along the Little Arkansas was reached, allowing the train to enter open country unmolested.

Here the land became flat again, barren. It stretched away to a range of mountains rising rank upon rank into the morning light.

Before mid day the first long-spiked Yucca caused a halt while the caravan examined this curious plant. Someone who had been in the southwest before told how its base held a sponge of water.

Presently they saw many like it, for they had come to the edge of true wilderness. At once the air became drier, the grass scarce, the way more killing to man and beast.

Life in the train seemed awed by the foreboding spirit of the country. Its silence turned them silent, its bleakness chilled their hearts; they dropped beneath the increasing sun; they became gaunt, brooding specters, stalking with bowed heads, shoulders bent across a lifeless world.

At first their silence was not altogether because of the land. Death had saddened many of the wagons, leaving an empty seat where a father or brother would drive no more. Then there were the wounded, who lay fighting back cries of agony as they jolted over the road.

Six hospital wagons were made for these, families doubling up their cargoes that cots might be set on the box floors. Doctor Sharpe gave patent medicines, but Ma Grant knew it was her pain-killer that wrought the most rapid recoveries.

There was one who refused to lie beneath the canvas tops.

"On one of them damned hay racks?" Tom scoffed. "I'd soon be dead!"

Each morning after he blew "boots and saddles" he mounted his horse, tied the injured leg to the stirrup guard "to keep it from flappin'," then rode to his place beside Kirk in advance of the column.

It was rough treatment for an open bullet wound, even for the old trooper. The saddle-leather turned black where blood

oozed down. He often lolled in moments of weakness. But he refused to quit. At last Kirk ceased arguing and ordered him back to the wagons.

"Tonight," Tom promised. "But this afternoon I'm watchin' something else."

They were riding knee to knee, smoking, talking, with the train strung in a dust cloud half a mile behind them. Kirk looked at him, nodding.

"You mean Pitt? Don't worry, he's keeping low since Pawnee Fort. He thought we would jump on him and when we didn't he's puzzled. Is that it; or do you believe he's hatching trouble?"

"Else why'd I tell ye, Gin'rel? Pitt and the saloon crowd are keepin' close company these days. Have ye noticed? The whiskey tank's hangin' back. Others are fallin' in with it. There's Greene and Howe givin' credit to men with no families an' no farmin' tools. An' they all done a pile of gamblin' along the road, so now there must be some of 'em broke. California ain't marked on their tickets!"

Tom lapsed into silence. Kirk squinted across the desert. He too, had noticed this grouping of wagons at the rear of the line. One by one certain outfits had drawn together. Kirk saw the reason now. In two weeks, if men and animals could fight through, they would be in Santa Fe, where Grant's cargo was as good as so much gold. He swung back to Trooper Tom.

"You think that gang have their eyes on the trade wagon?"

"I do so, and our Pawnee fight won't be nothin' when they get ready to knife us. Damn this old leg! I don't want to be lyin' on my back lookin' at the stars when things begin."

Yet the old warrior was doing just what he revolted against when the stars broke out that night. At sundown Kirk stopped both horses, waited for the train to catch up, then lifted him bodily from his saddle. So Ma Grant had another patient, while Trooper Tom suffered the soldier's disgrace of riding stretched flat "on one of them danged hay racks."

For a week now the train crawled further into the depths of the desert. The days were longer as summer approached. Dawn came at four o'clock. Daylight lasted until almost nine. But those hours were unbearably hot, forcing the column to halt through a period at noon. Often the wagons drove in lines of three, trying to get comfort from one another's shade.

Under the desert's relentless spell neighbors wrangled, friendships vanished. Another week, and the sinister shadow of starvation hung over them.

It was early morning when a gaunt-bodied man from the middle of the train shuffled up to Grant's camp in the lead.

"I'm through," he announced bitterly. "Ain't goin' another step."

Grant looked up from his breakfast fire. "What's the trouble?"

"My chuck box is empty and my water barrel's have been cracked dry goin' on two days. I'm through!"

"You can't stay here and die," Grant answered, placing a hand on the man's arm. "Stick it out one more day, can't you?"

"Ain't no use. What're we headed for, anyway?"

"Captain Mallory is supposed to be leading us into California," said Grant, his own voice a little doubtful. "We've been depending on him knowing the land. Now he says there's a buffalo run along the Big Sandy. He says we'll have our wagon full of meat come tomorrow."

On down the line of fires that morning, even to the gambler's camp, the same question was being asked, and the same answer given.

"It's up to Captain Mallory," the train said. "We've followed him."

Kirk knew what they were saying and urged the drivers to a swifter pace.

"Buffalo steak for supper!" he laughed. "Let's go get it."

Gradually the desert floor rose to the range of mountains. The beds of watercourses formed miles of parallel ravines, which emptied into a broad valley beyond. But these first streambeds were dry, and the wagon train pushed on to the main valley. They reached the last bank at mid-afternoon, whipped their horses into a race over its crest, and halted—to stare at the bottom land below.

A stupefied silence fell over them, broken only by the rattle of wheels as the rear wagons drove into line along the ridge. Then a rumble of voices rolled down the string, bursting into a snarl of oaths as it neared the lone figure sitting his horse

in the lead staring into the valley.

The farmers dropped their reins, leaped to the ground, and strode in a sullen, vengeful mob toward Captain Kirk.

Grant stepped out to meet them, his calm voice rising above their shouts.

"This is no time to lose your heads!"

Ignoring the crowd, Kirk looked again on that sight below. Where he had once ridden through a bottom of green, covered with herds of buffalo, there was nothing now save brown spikes. The tips of grass had died when growth was just begun. The river bed was dry.

VIII

KIRK turned from his survey of Big Sandy to see Trooper Tom stagger from his cot. Advancing with one hand at his pistol butt, and with the old soldier at his side, he spoke to the throng of men.

"Grant is right; this is no time to lose your heads. No one could have foreseen a drought."

A knot in the rear scoffed. Kirk whirled, his anger rising.

"Come on then! You Pitt, and you Dunham, and the rest of you back there, speak out!"

Silence fell over the group.

"If any man in this train thinks he can do better than I'm doing," Kirk went on, "let him step over here. If he can answer a few questions I'll put him in my place." No one came forward. "All right then, I'm still leading. There'll be no halt this noon. When we climb into those hills across the river we may find water and meat of some sort. It's a chance, but the only way we have left. Now move up!"

There was grumbling and muttered threats from the Missouri farmers.

"Hits what we git fer follerin' the damned Army. Knew it all, he did! We'll starve, that's what, an' shrivel up with no water. Never was a soldier worth a hopfrog's beller noway!"

But they continued to follow Kirk's lead. They crossed the bed of Big Sandy and camped that night some distance within the foothills. The scant desert growth had early given place to buckhorn, with now the first clumps of mountain oak showing in the canyons.

In the afternoon a dog jumped a rabbit from the brush, and that was all they found of Kirk's promised meat. Nor was there water in the streambeds.

By nightfall desperation brought renewed threats from men already half-crazed by the desert.

Knowing the growth of hatred, Kirk spread his blankets on the slope above the wagon train. With Trooper Tom's cot nearby he sat watching as one by one the campfires in the ravine glowed and died.

Trooper was delirious, mumbling in broken sentences. It was not until past midnight that Kirk went to sleep.

Stars were still in a dim mist overhead when he leaped from his blankets with Tom's voice in his ear:

"Gin'rel!"

Trooper was sitting with his head lifted, his nose drawing a scent from the air.

"Gin'rel, it's coffee. Smell it?"

Kirk reached across to push him down. He knew it was the fever again, for there had been no coffee made in the train during several weeks, every family hoarding its supply by using sage or blackroot tea. Looking down on the camp, he saw no fire at this early hour.

"Go to sleep, Tom," he whispered.

Trooper fought off his hand.

"It's coffee; else why'd I tell ye. Nigger black and stronger'n bug juice. That's the only thing I need this minute."

Kirk shook his head.

"Ye dam' fool!" Tom snapped. "Ye think I'm drunk or somethin'? It's coffee I say. Can't ye smell it? Comin' right down the canyon from over the ridge. Gin'rel, yer goin' to ride over there an' get me some of that!"

"All right, Trooper," Kirk agreed, rising. He'd go just to please the feverish man and probably find him asleep when he came back.

He saddled his horse and rode directly up the backbone. When he looked around after going some distance, Trooper Tom still sat on his cot, watching.

As Kirk rode further into the hills the overlying growth became more dense, pine and cedar appearing with the oak, until, passing over the crest of a ridge where dawn flooded the slopes, he gazed across a wooded highland.

Here he suddenly stopped, his face lifted into the breeze. The odor was unmis-

takable. Tom was right. Someone *was* boiling coffee. Kirk shifted in his saddle. Mexicans?

Through a lane of trees he saw a man walk with an iron bucket, dip water from a pool, and return. Even in the morning light Kirk could see he was not Mexican. Touching up his horse he rode toward the stranger's camp.

Half a dozen men sprang up, reaching for their guns as he approached, but dropped again to their places about a breakfast fire when they noted his uniform. In a quick survey of the outfit he saw the high-sided wagon, a string of saddled horses, and the long-barreled buffalo rifles nearby. Hunters. He knew this, too, by their blood-stained leather breeches and skinning knives.

One advanced to meet him.

"Come sort of early for your load, ain't you Cap'n?"

The casual tone and strange question brought a frown to Kirk's face.

"You got me, friend. Load of what?"

"Why meat. Ain't you from the troops?"

"What troops?"

"My God! Well, I reckon you must have come in from the desert. I thought you be from Kearny, wantin' your meat fer today. We be hunters, Cap'n, supplyin' the army."

"The army!" Kirk exclaimed. "Here?"

"Yep. 'Bout a mile up the road."

"And you've got meat? What is it, buffalo? I'm leading a wagon train that's half-starved. If you have any on hand bring it along."

"Ain't buffler, Cap'n. Nary buffler this spring. But we've got three elk quartered there in the wagon, an' a whole herd spotted up yonder."

"Bring it—and charge it to the army. Say! Will you give me that coffee?"

"Don't ask, soldier, don't ask! Jest drink her down."

"Not for me. I've got a wounded man back with the train. He sat up and smelled this stuff half a mile away."

"Lor' A'mighty," the hunter chuckled, "I knew she was gettin' strong! Take it to 'im."

With the pot in his gloved hand, Kirk whirled up the ridge, flinging back, "Let Kearny know Captain Mallory is here with a wagon train, will you?"

Trooper Tom greeted him without surprise. He gulped the black liquid with a grin of satisfaction.

"There now," he said. "Where'd ye get it an' what did ye learn."

Kirk told him the news, then added, "If Kearny's here it means big business ahead."

Below them the camp was awakened by the rattle of wagon wheels as the hunters brought in their load. For a moment the trainmen stared, pointing. Then shouts broke out along the line. At once the quarters of elk were hung up, and chunks slashed off. As fast as fires could be built an odor of broiled meat filled the air.

"Go get us some," Tom urged. "I'm sure recoverin'!"

Kirk's own hunger gnawed beneath a belt that was drawn four holes tighter than normal. He returned with tongues for Trooper, ribs for himself, and spitted them over the fire until they were roasted brown and juicy.

The meal was scarcely finished when a soldier wearing sergeant's stripes rode into the train. Directed by the first man he met, he headed up the slope, leaping to the ground as his horse halted.

"Captain Mallory?"

"Yes, Sergeant."

"Colonel Kearny's compliments, sir. You're to report for duty at once. We're camped just above here."

"What's up?" Kirk asked.

"It's war again! The armistice is ended. General Taylor joined us last night with fifteen hundred volunteers. We're marching on Santa Fe."

Kirk sprang to his feet, swept by a thrill he had not felt for months. War again! He strapped on the pair of dragoon revolvers.

"All right, Sergeant, I'll go back with you. Stay here with the wagons, Trooper. They'll move up to water this morning."

IN half an hour's ride Kirk gained a bend of the canyon, and saw that which brought a grim smile to his eyes. Ahead where the road struck across a meadow, an army was bivouacked, its tents, men and animals spotted over the green bottom.

At the further side he saw the systematic camp of regulars, two hundred of the first dragoons, a part of whom he had

once commanded. But the rest of the field was a hodge-podge, where volunteer companies of Mississippi rifles, Kentucky cavalry, and groups from other states made camp in whatever position they had halted at the end of the night march.

Such an army! Kirk laughed with the sergeant beside him as they rode through it. Yet his humor was one of respect. Not many of these volunteers had been in service more than a few months, some no more than weeks. The armistice had given a little time for training, but their hands were still calloused from axes and plows, not from guns.

Fathers, brothers, sons and uncles spread their blanket rolls in little camps; whole families had answered the call and kept together here in the southwest. Their uniforms were whatever they had worn at home, coarse wools or leather breeches, with coats of fur. But behind all this confusion was the one spirit; they had come to fight.

Only the dragoons stood out in the Army's red jackets and blue trousers tucked into high boots, gauntlet gloves, weathered faces under campaign hats with sugar-loaf crowns and wide brims.

Dismounting before the headquarters tent, Kirk strode past the orderly and stood at salute within the open flaps.

Kearny, Taylor, Clark; what high places these would some day hold in the nation's regard! Yet now their task was thankless. The men behind them were scorned, despised, called renegades and border ruffians.

It was Colonel Kearny who spoke first, his brown eyes peering steadily over a slight gray beard.

"You've come in good time, Captain. Did you know the armistice was ended?"

"Not until a few hours ago, sir. I've been on the road with a wagon train."

"Then I suppose you have heard no news at all. General Santa Anna is gathering every Mexican above Sonora to come against us. Reports give him ten thousand. Then he will have several hundred of his Navajo butchers. We're headed to meet him in Purgatory Pass."

Thought of the numbers sent a tension over Kirk. Ten thousand!

"How strong are we now, sir?" he asked.

"Nineteen hundred—but they're American wildcats!" Kearny replied. He looked up quizzically, adding, "Is Trooper Tom with you?"

"Yes, sir."

"That makes it an even two thousand."

The officers in the tent laughed. Kearny continued: "I can't return you to the dragoon, Captain. You're still under court-martial probation."

"How about the train, sir? I've led it so far and don't like to quit now. Let me make it a part of the regiment—and command it myself."

"Will your men fight?"

Kirk chuckled. "You should have been in my place this past week, sir! They fight themselves."

"Then muster them in. I never had a train of squatters in the dragoons before, but you can try it. We move at daybreak tomorrow."

Retreating from the tent, Kirk turned to see the line of wagons rocking up the canyon in search of a camp ground near the meadow stream.

He chuckled as he swung to his horse and rode to give the new order.

Presently the Missouri farmers, who had revolted against his military rule and called all soldiers blackguards, found themselves enlisted in the Army of the West.

IX

WAR! Not the skirmish of pioneer fighting, from tree to tree, with Indians lurking somewhere in the shadows, but thousands of men on an open field, carving their way by the force of death alone.

This knowledge worked its change in Grant's caravan. For a time petty troubles were forgotten; all men were drawn together by the one somber thought. They were marching to war.

That night the twang of a banjo came from Jeb Daley's wagon, and above it the old man's voice:

> Fare ye well Milissa,
> Fare ye well Milissa Gray;
> For I'm trampin' with the Army
> To be buried far away.

"Oh, for Lord's sake!" someone objected. "Give us a jig"

"I'll do-ee Johnny, if ye'll dance." Jeb

whanged out an opening chord. "Grab yer partners. Swing 'em round!"

Oh, there was an old hen,
An' she had a wooden leg,
The best old hen
That ever layed an egg.

His boot beat time on the wagon box.

She layed all the eggs,
That were layed on the farm;
Another little drink,
Wouldn't do us any harm!

In the firelight before the string of white tops the girls and young men danced, while soldiers came and looked on hungrily, or joined them whenever a turn was offered. What did youth care for the war!

But the bugle at dawn roused the farmers with an ominous meaning. Many calls echoed the first. Across the meadow a fife and drum corps rattled out a spirited march. The army was breaking camp.

Kirk was early in his saddle and rode to Nate Grant with a word of advice.

"Everyone ought to eat hearty now. It's the last hot meal they'll have for some time. When we start, drive your wagons along with the dragoons. I'm ordered up in front, so may not see you until we reach Purgatory Pass." He looked down at the other man with a grin of mingled pride and amusement. "What do you think of it?"

"Seems like the hull dam' country has turned soldier!"

Grant went on to harness his mules. Kirk joined a troop of scouts.

The main army was already on the road when the sun burst over the hills, the guidons and colors of each squadron, regiment and battalion, crimson, green, yellow and blue, blowing above the horses and men.

It was a gala day. Every man was a conqueror; Colonel Kearny and his first dragoons, General Taylor with his volunteers. Colonel Clark with the nation's boast in field artillery—five eight-pounders, ten six-pounders, and half a dozen soup-pots. With the ranks moved Grant's California wagons, the whole mass pouring through the bottleneck of the meadow, then into the canyon beyond.

Mid-morning brought the column to a wide, cultivated valley, with the first settlement the squatters had seen in eight hundred miles. It was a village of block houses made of mud and arranged in the Mexican style, all facing an inner plaza.

Here Kirk's advance guard captured two spies whose mounts lost in a race with the cavalrymen. When led before Colonel Kearny they were promised a release for certain information, and so admitted the Mexican general was marching toward Purgatory Pass on its western side, hoping to gain the position before the Americans arrived.

Kearny's humor showed in his glance at the officers around him.

"Sort of a race for the heights of hell!"

After scratching one sentence on a sheet of paper he turned back to his prisoners.

"Take this to your general. Tell him he may answer it or not."

The army moved on through the village, but the colonel halted his staff long enough to approach a ladder leading to the flat top of a house, intending to address those people who had not answered Santa Anna's call. They were mostly women with their old men, but there were also a score of the town's officials.

Just as Kearny stepped toward the ladder a thunder of hoofbeats turned all eyes down the road. Five riders came in a cloud of dust across the valley, following in the army's wake to stop with horses winded, their own faces drawn and trail-worn.

"Dispatches from Washington, sir," said one, saluting. "Relayed from Leavenworth. We heard a battle was near and rode all night to be in it."

Kearny took the packet, opened it, hesitated. His smile shared what he had read with the other men.

"This is not for me alone; it belongs to you, and to all those boys going out there. You have made me a brigadier general. This is my commission."

Turning abruptly he sprang up the ladder to the housetop and spoke to the villagers with a new fire in his voice.

"You people of New Mexico: I have come amongst you by the order of my government to take possession of your country and extend over it the laws of the United States. We come to you as friends, not as enemies; as protectors, not as conquerors.

"Henceforth I absolve you from all al-

legiance to the Mexican Government and from all obedience to General Santa Anna. I am your governor. I shall not expect you to take up arms and follow me to fight against your own people, but I now tell you that those who remain peaceably at home shall be protected by me in their property, their persons, and their religion. Not an onion, not a pepper shall be disturbed or taken by my troops without pay.

"But listen! He who promises to be quiet and is found in arms against me, I will hang! There goes my army. You see but a small part of it. Resistance is useless."

There was a commotion among the citizens when he finished. They grinned and exchanged looks of satisfaction. One was bold enough to stand out and say they would do whatever the Americans asked; that the Americans were now their friends.

General Kearny nodded, but when he descended the ladder he said quietly to his men, "Don't trust a soul!"

A mountain chain rose ahead, cut by a single narrow defile in all the face presented toward the valley. That one break was Purgatory Pass, to be reached in half a day's march from the village.

In the afternoon a lone truce-bearer met the advance guard with an answer from Santa Anna. Kirk accepted it, rode back to Kearny, and stood gripped by renewed eagerness as the general read aloud:

"You have notified me that you are taking possession of New Mexico. If you do, it is because you are strongest in battle. Come at your pleasure."

"No Mexican phrased that!" Kearny exploded.

"Maybe not," Kirk answered. "I've heard some of our deserters are with him. He's made them high officers. Well, they'll see the other end of American guns before long!"

The general turned a solemn face toward him.

"There's the road to Santa Fe, Captain. Follow it and don't come back until you can give me Santa Anna's position."

Kirk departed, riding with his picketmen into the mountain pass. Evening found him halted on the divide, sitting his horse at a point where he could look down on the plains to the west and on the valley to the east.

His eyes were turned westward, as through a glass he studied a black line that came without end across the flatland. Reports had not exaggerated Santa Anna's strength. Down there were ten thousand men or more, massed in four divisions like great herds of buffalo.

But the Mexicans were still some distance from the Purgatory, too far to do more than camp at its western mouth by nightfall, while the short string that marked Kearny's advance from the east was already under the brow of the mountains.

Leaving the guards to stand watch, Kirk rode back to warn the army. The general began preparations at once.

The natural defence of Purgatory Pass was from the top of a mesa which shelved out from a mountain on the right flank. Here the infantry and cavalry of both armies could meet on open ground, leaving the artillery to fight their duel in the narrow defile below.

According to this plan the volunteers, dragoons, and one six-pounder climbed to the mesa and were deployed in a line from the brim overlooking the pass, to the mountainside rising in almost a sheer face from across the quarter mile of plateau.

The eight-pounders were mounted halfway up the Purgatory itself, while as a rear guard to meet the possibility of a rush around the mountain, there was the battery of soup-pots, whose hail of grape and chain from short, broad mouths could do deadly work in close fighting.

These also guarded the wagon train, halted away from the main field, and were commanded by Lieutenant Sumner, a gallant lad of eighteen who, feeling the eyes of so many women upon him, prayed the Mexicans would make this rear attack. He'd gladly meet them with his life—for beauty!

Night came; black, silent, pierced only by the stars overhead, for on the ground no campfires burned. Kearny knew there must be spies on the ridge, and he was not showing them how small an army lay entrenched in Purgatory Pass.

Men slept in line across the mesa top; dragoons with their horses standing over them, riflemen with powder and shot rammed home.

Back along the California train a solitary figure paced slowly, moodily, stopped

a moment before Grant's wagon, but seeing it was dark walked on.

There were many things Kirk wanted to say. His soldier's knowledge knew too well what the battle might bring on these women. Ten thousand Mexicans meant a fiendish horde, yet he feared them less than the few hundred Navajos. Butchers, well named! They carried no guns, only knives, and did their bloody work when the soldiers had broken the way.

Kirk halted again before Betty Asher's tent, swept by an overwhelming desire to see her. Bitter loneliness had come often since that night he first found her, although for a week he had held aloof deliberately. Now he wanted to tell her the many things he had realized, more trenchantly than ever, and learn the truth of her own heart before facing tomorrow's chances.

His low call brought no answer. He turned away, making for his camp apart from the train.

Trooper Tom was sitting on their blanket roll squinting at a star through his polished rifle barrel.

"I reckon ye'll do, Molly-girl," he murmured.

"How's the leg?" Kirk asked.

"Good enough to chase any dam' Mexican clean across the Rio Grande!"

Kirk sat down beside him, waiting.

A squad of the relief guard swung through the night. After the clump of their boots, came silence. The army, too, was waiting.

X

AT three o'clock the advance pickets from the divide rode in on a run. Their words went swiftly among the men:

"The Mexicans are coming!"

"To arms" rang out from the buglers. Kirk and Trooper Tom came up from the wagons and joined the dragoons where they stood beside their mounts, with revolvers drawn, on the mesa.

These men were calm, hardened to the tense wait before an attack. But a surge of excitement ran through the ranks of volunteers, expressed by an eager shout as General Kearny, astride a jet black horse, trotted in front of them. He halted on the open field to speak in tones that carried far along the line of impatient men.

"In a few minutes, men, we will meet an enemy that outnumbers us five to one. But remember you are Americans!"

A cheer greeted his words. Kearny's eyes twinkled.

"I see you get my meaning. Then there's no more for me to say."

He returned through a gap in the ranks. At a sign from his hand the buglers gave the order to advance. With the line unbroken dragoons and volunteers left their entrenchments and moved across the mesa, stopping only when they reached the western rim.

The sun was coming over the hills at their backs. A silence gripped them, for through the first morning light they looked down on Santa Anna's horde. The front ranks filled the mouth of the pass from wall to wall, the rear guard was lost around a bend.

Soon the Mexicans broke into three columns, one, the main body, spreading out to climb the plateau ridge, a second with field pieces continuing up the pass, a third held back as reserves.

Kirk watched them through his glass, then swept the banks on either side. Suddenly he stopped, his gaze fixed on another sight. Far up the mountain slope the Navajo butchers crept through the cover of brush like a pack of brown wolves. He could see their half-naked bodies, animal skins over their shoulders held down by knife belts.

They moved slowly, waiting for Santa Anna to begin the attack.

It came with a spurt of rifles along the ridge. Kearny had ordered the fire held until the Mexicans were part way up the slope, but that onrushing mass was more than the volunteers could resist. They'd come through Indians and across deserts for this fight. Now let it begin!

Their aim was deadly even at this long range, with the Mexicans just reaching the foot of the bank. The column wavered, turned, and plunged into the course of a ravine. Here, with no undergrowth to check it, the men came up at a run.

The Americans on the ridge top crowded in to meet the advance. For a moment they seemed to hold it, then a cry of warning rose above the gunfire. The Mexican reserve column had gained a coulee fur-

ther toward the mountain, and was already close to the mesa top.

Dragoons flashed across to this second point of contact. The Mississippi rifles followed, yet now, with the force divided, neither body of Americans could halt the endless streams.

"Retreat" blew down on the morning wind. Firing, walking a few paces to the rear as they reloaded, firing again Kearny's troops fell back toward the entrenchments. Behind these humps of earth they took up their grim stand.

They were unmoved before repeated charges of the Mexicans, but for every brown man they dropped there seemed five to take his place, while in their own ranks bare spots were showing.

Throughout the forenoon they clung to these holes like badgers.

In the rear guard at the wagon train Lieutenant Sumner was having his wish fulfilled. With the first shot of the opening attack a cavalcade of Mexican lancers swept from hiding around the skirt of the mountain, and drove headlong at the string.

A hail of grape from the soup-pots tore through them. They came on, unchecked, goaded by lust and the sight of women. The rush carried those who were unwounded into the group of wagons. Sumner's men, not daring to fire the cannister in that direction, drew their knives and joined the fighting farmers.

It was no longer the army's war, with the Missourians. Now they fought for their homes and their women, first with rifles, then hand to hand. Even Dunham and his followers of the saloon wagon found themselves facing the Mexicans with the rest.

Anglo-Saxon bone and sinew proved up well against the short flare of Latin courage. Men and women alike blazed away from behind the wagon tops. The lancers withered before their fire, turned in a panic, and leaving more than half their number dead or wounded fled back around the mountain.

Although the young lieutenant's guns were silenced, he had proved his own gallantry in a duel of swords. He lay with a slashed arm, happy even through his pain, as Ma Grant with her nurses gave both relief and praise.

News of the rear-guard victory failed to cheer the men on the mesa. High-noon sun poured upon them. Through the morning they had blocked the Mexican charges, hoping each one might be the last, only to see a fresh swarm surge up from the pass.

Courage could not hold out forever against endless reserves.

General Kearny was in conference with officers of the line over the final plan of counter-attack, when word reached him of Lieutenant Sumner's uncomfortable position.

"If we only had those soup-pots up here!" Kearny exclaimed. "They're no longer in use down below. The eight-pounders are holding the pass, thank God."

"But if Santa Anna saw us moving them—" Kirk began.

"Oh I know, it's hopeless. If he saw them coming he would bring on his mass rush. He's only waiting now until we are weaker."

Kirk's thoughts flashed to the wagon train. For a time he did not hear the general, but sat tensed, absorbed in plans of his own. Suddenly he sprang up.

"Will you give me Sumner's command, sir? And a few men to guard the wagons?"

Kearny shook his head.

"We need every man up here."

"But you can hold out for an hour longer, and in an hour I'll have those soup-pots in Santa Anna's face! I'll do it, sir!"

For a moment Kearny hesitated. Yet any reasonable plan was worth an attempt when an army was making its last stand against a superior force. He asked a question, questioned his officers, and finally agreed to Kirk's request. When the captain had departed he crawled among the entrenched men, encouraging them to hold their ground.

They fought through an hour with the last surge of strength, unhorsed dragoons filling the gaps in the infantry. Kentucky, Arkansas, Mississippi, Indiana—men from these border states knew what defeat would mean, and leaped out to turn the Mexican charge with a counter-rush of blade and gunfire, until exhausted, they retreated again to their entrenchments.

A mutter of voices came from the end where the volunteers could look down on the rear guard. Word was passed along the line. A new sound broke above the

rifles. Looking backward the troops saw a line of farm wagons scrambling up the ridge. They rose over the mesa rim, their tops rocking crazily, a bearded Missourian on each seat lashing his plow horses into a gallop.

There were six in all. Kearny's men stared in wonder. The Mexicans, too, seemed impressed for the moment by the unreasonable sight.

While this instant of doubt held the field, the wagons, sweeping out in front of the trenches, circled back, their tailboard presented in a line toward the Mexicans. At once the trick was evident. But even as Santa Anna's massed charge began, the horses were cut loose, the wagon flaps torn off, and a roar from half a dozen soup-pots drowned the American cheers.

With wheels removed from its own carriage, each gun was lashed in the wagon box. Now, with crews already at their places during the race up from the pass, they poured a storm of grape and chain into the pack of Santa Anna's men.

The attack halted, broke, and was mowed down by that wall of shot. As fast as the Mexicans retreated the wagons advanced until, with the rim of the mesa gained, the guns were anchored and continued to hurl their steel into the cayon below.

Dragoons swept down to block the western mouth of the pass. The battery of eight-pounders cut off a column that sought to break through the east entrance.

It was a three-cornered fire that meant annihilation for the horde trapped in the Purgatory. In half an hour there was no more for the cannon to do.

Prisoners were taken, a squad of cavalry set out to follow Santa Anna and his staff, who had escaped, while on the mountainside the Navajo butchers slunk away.

Shadows of evening were already darkening the pass. Volunteers and dragoons dropped to the field with the dead and wounded, themselves inert with fatigue. As no one knew what number of the enemy had escaped, officers sat watch through the night, waiting anxiously for dawn.

It came at last; clear and cool with a golden sun. And with it the pursuit troops returned, saying Santa Anna had not halted in his flight to the south.

General Kearny drew his men about him. It was a memorable day; ten thousand Mexicans whipped by less than two thousand volunteers—and Captain Kirk's California wagons!

XI

A SCATTERING of mud huts on the valley floor, a silver river bordered by green fields of corn, and beyond the sheer, red bluffs of the Paso del Norte—that was old Santa Fe.

It was a village of continual siesta, where men warmed their backs against the adobe walls and dozed through the sunlit days; where work, if any, was done by women; where traders passed going north or south, and life usually moved at a snail's pace.

But on this morning the streets were filled with excited throngs. Mounted men raced across the plaza, ox-carts were being loaded with household goods, donkeys already packed were making a line to the hills. A family on the highest housetop shouted their cry of warning:

"Americano! Americano!"

They looked again toward the mountain pass, stared at the invading army, then turned to flee with the rest. All knew what to expect. Santa Anna had told them what would happen if they did not join him to fight off the Americans. Their homes would be looted, their women taken, everything destroyed.

So again Kearny advanced triumphantly to a settlement that was deserted save for a few of the very old, a handful of town officials who had not believed Santa Anna's threat, and some Pimos Indians who neither understood nor cared.

At once the general took possession of the plaza, delivered his message, and promised protection if the people returned peaceably to their homes.

The news went swiftly to the hill-tops where many carts had halted, their owners looking back, and soon the families came jolting down. Mexican moods change with the minute. Even as the carts entered the village there was singing, laughter, and exclamations of curiosity instead of fright. The people were tired of war.

Shops reopened for business. Men sat

once more warming their backs on adobe walls. The Mexican flag was hauled down and the Stars and Stripes raised to the plaza pole. No matter. Santa Fe dozed again in the sun.

Having neared the town with the victors, Grant's train had detached itself at the river bank and made camp. Here the families were counting their losses, confused, worn, their plans not yet returned to the future.

For a day they rested, and for a day no one asked, "Are we going on?"

Then came tidings that fired their hopes, and set all hands to work in feverish impatience. A scout, riding down from the Oregon Trail, brought news of the Pacific conquest. Commodore Stockton's tars and marines had taken California. When the scout had left—and that was three months ago—the whole country had given in to the Americans.

It was Jeb Dayley who brought this word from his soldiers. He rode into the river camp astride his mule, shouting:

"Californy is ours! Hooray fer Californy!"

Men shook hands. Women wept. Paradise was theirs! Nothing blocked their way now.

Kirk, standing with Trooper Tom while the settlers clutched hungrily at this chance for joy, smiled at what they said. Nothing to block their way! Nothing more than a thousand miles of deserts, mountains, and an unmarked trail across the southwest where wagons had never been.

"Are we goin' along?" Tom asked.

Kirk surveyed him seriously.

"Do you want to?"

"Else why'd I ask ye! We're not through yet."

"Then I'll ride up and see what Kearny says about it."

The general scowled when Kirk announced his plan.

"You're attached to the troops now, in war time. That wagon train is headed straight for hell. I tried to convince them of it."

"They have a chance, sir. I went with scouts under Carson and believe I can get the wagons through."

Kearny hesitated, then looked up, smiling.

"Do you want to go because of a blue-eyed girl I saw watching you when I was in Grant's camp?"

Kirk shrugged. "You've guessed part of it. The other part is personal. It will be for the good of the service if I go."

"Love is always for the good of the service," Kearny laughed. "Captain, what was the charge of your court-martial?"

The question made Kirk wince.

"Incompetency."

The general said nothing, but continued to write on a sheet of paper, then creased and sealed it.

"I can detail you to deliver these despatches to Commodore Stockton. They are extremely important. When do your farmers leave?"

"As soon as they get their outfits in order. They lost some horses and mules in the battle, and I know they are none too well provisioned."

Kirk gave this information with significant emphasis. General Kearny nodded his approval.

"Send them to the plaza this afternoon. The army owes them something for what they did."

Returning to the string, Kirk gave the order to Nate Grant. Before nightfall there were many new mules in the river camp, wheels had been refitted with tires by the army blacksmiths, and chuck boxes replenished from quartermaster stores.

Some of the families would go no further; a few must turn back because the war had taken their men, others saw good enough land here in Santa Fe. But that night was one of preparation in most of the wagons.

Over their evening mess fire, Kirk asked Trooper Tom a question that had been growing in his mind.

"Our victory sort of ruined whatever Pitt and Dunham were cooking up, don't you think? Prices in Santa Fe will be too low now to make stealing from Grant worth while."

"They're still high out in Californy."

"Do you think they'll go that far for the stuff?"

"I do so—but not just for trade goods. Dunham's got his eyes on something else. Pitt ain't got what he wants nuther."

The discussion ended in silence.

As the sound of their voices ceased, the music of a dance came from somewhere

toward the village. Looking across the space of darkness Kirk saw a blaze of lamplight in a willow thicket beyond the adobe walls.

"The spoils of this war don't belong to the victor," he laughed. "Mexico is cashing in already."

"Yep," Tom agreed. "Licker's gone to four-bits a drink. And I reckon them señoritas will just about empty the army's pockets up yonder. But Sho!" His feet shuffled on the ground. "What's a vict'ry without a jig!"

"Going?" Kirk asked.

Tom grinned. "Maybe I'll sort of look in. Comin'?"

"No. Keep your head up, Tom. You're drunk enough when you're sober. And drag back here before sunrise too."

Kirk sat listening as Tom mounted and vanished into the dark. His spirits were depressed on this night of victory. His true nature urged him to be up there celebrating with the others, instead of sitting like a fool with his energy sunk lower than his boots. The music was lively, drifting over the distance in beckoning tones, yet he ignored it.

His gaze wandered into the wagon camp. There was a light in the traveling saloon. Through an open door he could make out the figures of Greene and Howe, but no others. Everyone had gone to the fiesta. Grant's outfit was dark, also Betty's tent nearby.

Kirk frowned. She was dancing? Pitt too? Yet here he was, brooding like a stuffed owl!

Moved by self-reproach he stood up, secured his horse, and rode through the village. Presently, with his mount tied in the shadows, he joined the throng that swirled among the trunks of the trees, stopping at the edge of an open space where hard-packed ground made a dance floor.

A smile broke on his face as he saw Nate and Ma Grant trying to do a smooth waltz to the rapid, uneven time of the Mexican fandango. Other women from the wagons joined them and their laughter rose into the babel of many tongues. But Betty Asher was not with them, nor was Pitt.

Kirk walked on. He turned from the dance floor to another section, where walls of reeds woven through the willow trunks formed booths around the wine tables. These nooks were all occupied by groups of men with dark-skinned girls. Reaching one at the end of the line he saw it held only two men—two whose faces were instantly familiar.

Pitt was slumped on a seat, his head lolled toward the table top. Dunham, opposite him and apparently free from the effects of liquor, was talking.

His voice ended abruptly when Kirk looked into the booth.

Pitt's head jerked up, the stupor cleared for the moment by his instinctive blaze of hate.

"You?" he snarled. "I'll break your damn neck? Come for a chance to fight?"

Kirk halted. "You're drunk, Pitt and a fool. You know I won't fight here. I'm in service now, but . . ."

"You're right, Captain," Dunham cut in. His tone at once became friendly. "Now that you're in the army and it's war, we can drop this trail fuss. Will you drink on it?"

He poured wine from the flask on the table.

"Yes," Kirk agreed, watching him curiously, quite aware that there was no sincerity in his words. "I'll drink on it here, tonight. But when we go on the road again—"

Dunham lowered his cup.

"You're not going on! You're held with the troops!"

"Am I?" Kirk smiled. "No. Sorry to disagree, but I'm going to California with the wagons."

He had raised his cup, drinking with Dunham, when over its rim he saw Pitt's hand move. His own dropped to his gun. Before he could clutch the butt a wine flask hurtled over the table. He fell stunned into an endless chasm of black.

Dunham jerked Pitt way by one arm.

"You fool! We weren't ready. Now we're got to do everything. Hurry! I'll have things fixed in town. You go to the train. We can head south before anyone knows. It's in the grain box on Grant's wagon. She's in the tent, asleep. Quick!"

Running in opposite directions the pair vanished beyond the willow thicket.

Under the table, Kirk struck the bottom of the black hole into which he seemed to

have fallen, and became conscious of jumbled sounds in his ears. Then he heard a voice that aroused him to full control of his senses.

"She's in the tent, asleep."

Spurred to instant action he rolled through the reed wall at the back of the booth, found himself in the shadows and sprang up, running to the spot where he had left his horse.

Mounted, he swept from the scene of the dance, heading out on a road that led along the river directly toward the wagon camp. There were groups of men and women returning from the fiesta. In one he recognized the Grants, but passed them without looking backward as the animal beneath him broke into a dead run.

SLEEP had not come to Betty Asher. The same over-tiredness that had been her excuse for staying in camp held her eyes open even when she lay in the darkness of her shelter. She heard the soft, plaintive music from the dance with hot tears welling. It was beautiful, full of meaning, yet filled her heart with a sadness that grew until she turned on her pillow, striving to muffle the sound.

Hours seemed to have passed. Surely it was morning. Why did the Grants stay so long?

The night wind came with a puff of desert heat. She tossed back the covers, paused. A light footstep sounded beyond her tent.

Rising on one elbow she reached to regain the blanket when the flaps suddenly parted. The form of a man hesitated against the starlight, then knelt before she could cry out.

His hand closed on her mouth. His weight pushing her down, his face close to hers, he whispered, "Hush! Don't speak!"

She cringed away, chilled, rigid with fear.

With his words there had come another sound; someone running. A black form passed the triangle of light between the tent flaps. The man above her leaped out. As his shot answered a spurt of flame from beyond she saw Captain Kirk crouching there before her.

With the double report scarcely dead, the camp became alive with men, shouts, questions. The groups from the road ran in out of breath and excited. Among them were the Grants, who came directly to their outfit, halting in wonder and dismay at what they saw.

Betty stood in the tent opening, a blanket thrown about her shoulders, her eyes fixed on the man a few paces beyond. Grant strode ahead.

"Betty, what is it!"

She nodded toward the motionless figure.

"He came here. I don't know what for. There was shooting."

Grant turned. His hands were clenched, his iron jaw bulging.

"You, Captain! I'll give you just one minute to explain!"

Kirk faced him, his head in a daze from a wound that he now realized was a bloody gash along the right side.

"I overheard a threat and came here to protect this girl. That's all."

"A likely story!" Grant scoffed, his gray head quivering. "Yer a cure and a coward! Come on, hit me! Fight, damn ye! I'll fight ye an' all yer yeller kind. Come on, if yer a man!"

"Nate!" Ma Grant's voice was high, commanding.

He turned toward her.

"No, Ma, you can't stop me now. I'm through with this skunk and I'm goin' to skin the hide off'n his back. Come prowlin' around while we've gone, will he! I'll bust his damn. . . ."

"Hush up, and let the captain explain."

"There's not much I can explain, if you don't believe me," Kirk answered. He spoke to the group, but his eyes were on Betty Asher. He realized there was little to say now. What proof did he have of what he had overheard in the willows?

"You'll have to trust me, that's all."

"Trust ye long enough fer ye to get out'n this wagon string!" Grant retorted. "Ye ain't been drinkin'. Course not! Then we're to believe yer damned lies when ye think 'em up later. Ye'll not stay with us another foot—that's settled here and now!"

Ma Grant knew there were times when arguing with her husband was useless. This was one of them. He was firm in his belief. Even she could not move him when his stubborn will was set.

Kirk too saw he could say nothing against this burst of wrath. It had been

coming, storing up within the old man for many weeks on the trail. Confused in his own thoughts, his head throbbing with pain, he turned away. By tomorrow, he felt, Grant might have calmed down.

When the captain had gone, Nate swung again to his wife.

"I'm gettin' a new guide in the morning. I guess we've had proof enough of what that fellow is."

The woman shook her head, but making no answer walked to the girl by the tent.

"There now, child, never mind."

With the comfort of Mother Grant's arms about her, Betty gave way to the flood of despair she had controlled since evening. Looking up at last, she whispered:

"I don't believe it. I won't think him like that. I can't!"

TROOPER TOM had found a friend. Staggering joyously arm in arm, their discordant song raised to the midnight stars, two figures came down the road from the village.

"Why, dum yer black soul," Tom was repeating for the tenth time between verses of "Johnny Rum," halting his steps to gaze at his companion, "I'd never a knowed ye, Yucca! Where ye been all these years?"

Yucca Pete answered in the Pimos Indian tongue.

"Aw, hell," Tom objected, "talk American. Pimos is one of the jaw-crackers I done forgot."

When he saw the wagon camp appear out of the darkness he stopped abruptly, broke off the song, and clutched Pete's arm. He was not so much in liquor but that Kirk's order still sounded in his ears: "Keep your head up, Tom."

Head up? Trooper tested it to find out. Sort of heavy, he decided, not up very high. Maybe better wait a while.

"Yucca," he whispered, "suppose we set out this dance."

The Indian nodded. They left the road and planted themselves on a hummock nearby. After a moment of silence, while Tom squinted about to see that no one had observed the maneuver, he began a systematic search of his pockets. Those in his jacket were empty. There was no expected bulge beneath his belt pouch.

"Where'd I put our licker when that dum sargint looked me over, Yucca?" he asked.

Yucca Pete considered this dreamily, eyes half-closed, his head nodding. His face brightened as he discovered the whiskey flask hidden in Trooper's high boot.

The party was on again. This time there was no singing, not a sound above a succession of gurgles, a smack of lips, a snorted breath. Presently even these ended.

Tom sighed. "Ain't war hell! If 'tadn't been fer that dum sargint I'd brung me a barrelful." He leaned toward his friend. "Ain't you got nothin'?"

Yucca Pete hesitated. No treasure in the world was as priceless to the Indian as a bottle of whiskey. Yet the spirit of this meeting overcame a desire to save his own supply. Reaching to an inner pocket he fumbled for the half-pint he had concealed there.

The flask fitted snugly. As he drew it out another object fell on the ground, a lump that gleamed dull yellow in the moonlight.

Tom's hand turned from the bottle toward this little object. He picked it up and weighed it in his palm.

"Be Judas, Yucca! Where'd ye git the gold?"

"Find him," the Indian answered.

"Like hell! Ye stole it!"

"No," Yucca insisted. "I walk far in the hills. I cross the desert and climb mountains. I go up Night Creek to the Spanish gold cave. This is some of him."

"Yer a bleatin' liar, Yucca. This ain't part of the lost Spanish gold. I been up Night Creek myself, an' in the cave, too. The dum thing's filled with the bones of them that has. I know what's there!"

Yucca shrugged and drank from his bottle without further explanation.

Tom was still holding the nugget when the sound of horses coming along the road closed his hand with a jerk, and he crouched down while they passed. The mounted men were in too dim a light for a glimpse of their faces, and advanced with no word spoken between them.

Sitting up again, Tom saw now that he was not far from the saloon wagon, toward which the riders were heading. That gave him a happy thought. He clutched the Indian's arm.

"Yucca! Yonder's a cart-load of licker. Take yer gold an' git us a barrelful. I'll wait here; you do the tradin'."

Yucca Pete stared a moment through the night, then grinned his pleasure.

"I trade," he promised, "I trade good." And rising, he started toward the wagon.

WITHIN the traveling saloon, four men drawn close together around the bar talked with lowered voices.

"You botched the job, all right," Dunham averred, "but what's a fight at a time like this? No one will give a hang. You're sure he didn't see you enough to prove you were at Grant's wagon, so don't be a coward. We didn't get what we went after. That's what I'm talking about."

Greene, the bartender, nodded.

"This old tanker's getting dern near dry, and I'm not going to stock up for another chase over the country. You said we'd have the gold at Santa Fe. Now let's see it!"

"Pitt, if you weren't such a fool over that girl!" Dunham exploded. "What the blazes! There's plenty down South!"

Pitt raised himself from where he had slumped in a corner. He had long ago passed under the gambler's will, following his lead and obeying his orders in all things except one.

"You heard me!" he snapped. "She was the first reason why I came on this God-forsaken trip."

"And you've heard us!" Dunham retorted. "We're not after a female and there's three of us against you."

His voice dropped as there came a stumbling step and a knock at the door.

"Closed up," Greene called.

The knock persisted.

"Oh, let 'em in," said Jake Howe. "Gawd knows we need to sell something."

Greene opened the door, then walked behind the bar. All four men watched curiously as Yucca Pete entered and crossed the floor, staring at the bottled goods. Presently he spread his arms in a wide gesture.

"Barr'l. Barr'l whiskey?"

Greene's mouth drew into a sneer.

"I suppose you can pay cash, Injun."

Yucca Pete felt in his pocket, and drawing out his hand exhibited a lump of gold.

Behind Greene, Dunham hissed softly, whispering, "Wait!" Leaning across the bar, he spoke aloud, "No good."

"No good!" Yucca scoffed. "Spanish gold no good?"

The others gathered close to Dunham as he took the nugget from the Indian's hand. There was a moment of silence. Under the bar the gambler's boot prodded Greene's shin. Taking the hint, the bartender filled a glass.

"Here," he said, jovially, "have a drink. Just a sample on the house."

Yucca accepted, drank, reeled a little more on his feet, and seemed ripe for Dunham's next question.

"Spanish gold, you say, Injun? One time lost Spanish cave—you find?"

The Indian remained indifferent, yet with cunning instinct at work behind the blank mask of his face. Dunham tossed back the nugget.

"You can't pass stolen gold here!"

"I find him."

"Where?"

Again Yucca's face turned somber.

"I know. You give me drink?"

Greene's hand sought a gun beneath the bar.

"Make him tell," he whispered savagely.

A look from Dunham halted the movement. Aside to Greene he said: "Here's something big, and this fool's drunk enough to spill it. I know a bit already. Leave him to me." He turned again to Yucca. "Injun, here's a wagon-load of whiskey. Want it?"

There were bottles enough in sight to satisfy Yucca Pete's craving, no matter if he later found all the kegs were dry, but a mind for bargaining led him to show no eagerness. He stood as if what was offered held no appeal. Dunham leaned nearer.

"Lots of drink, big wagon, everything. The whole sheebang yours! Give us that gold. Tell us where the Spanish cave is."

At last Yucca Pete nodded.

"Listen," Dunham said, touching his gun, "you tell it straight, see? Or we come back and shoot, shoot, shoot!"

For several minutes there was a low mumble of voices in the wagon; lines were drawn on a sheet of paper. Then, walking quickly with packs in their hands, four men vanished into the night.

XII

ON the hummock near the road Trooper Tom sat cursing, with a rage that grew as time passed. He could see there

was no commotion to show trouble at the saloon wagon.

"Dern that Injun!" he grumbled. "Drinkin' it all hisself!"

His anger died as the saloon door opened and four figures came out, passed beyond his sight, then appeared spurring their horses up the river road. The voice of one drifted across to him.

"We'll have thirty miles' start by morning. Think the Injun will squeal when he gets sober?"

There was a short grunt.

"Not after he takes that last glassful."

In a moment they were gone. Looking back toward the wagon Tom saw Yucca Pete in the doorway, a bottle gripped in each hand. Little registered in Trooper Tom's mind save the threat he had heard. That was enough to send him running as fast as his unsteady legs allowed.

When he reached the saloon his eyes fell first on a glass placed close to the edge of the bar—a drink of whiskey with little white specks in the bottom.

"Strychnine!" he exploded, hurling it out the door. "Yucca, what in the name of Sweet Judas have ye done?"

Yucca Pete held up his bottles, sweeping them around to include the whole place.

"Him mine now. I trade for Spanish gold. I tell them go up Night Creek." The Indian paused with a nod toward the broken glass. "They give me poison? I give them more than that. Drink, big friend, we drink for white fools already—dead!"

Caution could not stop the wild whoop that burst from Tom, as understanding of what had happened filtered into his brain. He treated Yucca Pete; Yucca treated him. There was no limit on the roulette wheel when they played between themselves for more drinks. In half an hour they owned the world and sang to the world about it.

As the uproar continued it roused more than one man in his blankets, including Kirk. He recognized Trooper Tom's bellow and knew something had broken loose, something not altogether for the best, if he knew the man. He pulled on his boots and started toward the scene.

The party was in full swing when he reached the wagon. Empty bottles littered the floor. The bar, the walls, the ceiling dripped liquor. The roulette wheel lay torn from its table, cards were scattered like snowflakes, and in the center of the floor Trooper Tom sat with his arm locked across the shoulders of a Pimos Indian.

Kirk could not suppress a grin as he ordered, "Attention there!"

The words meant nothing to Yucca Pete, but Trooper Tom, a soldier even when imagining himself other things, made a valiant effort to stand erect. It was a disastrous failure that resulted in adding more broken bottles to the pile on the floor. Kirk's hand steadied him.

"Trooper, what are you doing here? Who's this, and where's the saloon gang?"

Tom took a deep breath.

"Gone."

That was all he could utter for the moment.

"Gone where?"

"T' hell. This 's my frien'. Gave 'em Spanish cave fer th' wagon." A spasm of chuckling rocked the trooper's frame. "Ain' that a good 'un?"

"Well, the celebration's all over," Kirk announced, taking Tom's arm. "Come on."

He turned from the bar, to pause on the top step as Nathan Grant confronted him.

"So it's just some more of your doin's, eh? I might have knowed it!"

Anger swept over Kirk.

"Shut up, Grant, until you know what you're talking about."

"Don't know what I'm talkin' about?" Grant retorted. "Well, I've heard enough standing out here to ask what you've done with Pitt and them others. What's your soldier and this Indian doin' with their things? It's my train, and I'll see it protected, even this saloon wagon."

"Grant," Kirk said, speaking quietly now, "you're simply an old fool. You've accused me of about everything you could lay hands on. What's happened here is none of your business nor mine. If it will make you sleep any better you might as well know that Pitt and his gang won't move with the rest of your outfit. They've gone hunting Spanish gold, and you're as well off without them."

Without waiting for the man to answer, Kirk turned away.

"Come on, Tom. Your friend's passed out."

Again in camp Trooper was soon asleep in his blankets, but Kirk sat staring into the night. He recalled the trip he and Trooper had made to Night Creek and the Spanish cave. There was gold in it, that same old gold dropped from the Conquistadors' packs and hidden during an Indian raid long ago. Tales of it had already sent men to the spot, and, as Tom had said, the bones of most of them lay there yet. Kirk knew it was a journey only a few could stand. What chance had these four fools, and what would happen when they saw what they had crossed deserts and mountains to reach?

He sensed the harshness of Grant's question, "What have you done with Pitt?" In the old man's embittered mind this business tonight would be construed as a cowardly trick.

Kirk's wandering thoughts halted abruptly. What if Betty, too, believed all this had been done to rid himself of a hated rival? The question grew, and when sleep came at last it was with a grim determination forming in his mind.

He learned the answer in the morning, one he had felt certain would come, and which he was prepared to meet. As he was rolling his camp stuff into a saddle pack Betty Asher walked from the wagons, passed through the screen of willows along the river, and stood before him. Sleeplessness showed in her eyes and in the hollows of her cheeks, yet her lips were firm as she forced her voice to ask its question steadily.

"What have you done with Pitt?"

Perhaps she was ignorant of the appeal in her troubled expression; it was all the more cause for a man to want to shield her, to comfort her with his sympathy. Kirk felt it, dropped his pack, and took a step that brought him within arm's reach of the little figure. He smiled at her question.

"Did Grant tell you to ask that?"

"He doesn't know I have come here. He told me nothing save what he overheard; that Pitt was tricked into a search for Spanish treasure; that he has gone to some terrible land, and may already be dead. Is it true? Did you make no attempt to stop him?"

"There's no turning a man when he has the lust for gold," Kirk replied. "Pitt didn't ask my advice. Why should I have interfered?"

"Because he was ignorant, while you knew he was riding to almost certain death. Did you think you could get me that way?"

Betty's hand caught at her throat, as the control she had maintained melted before the undeniable love of the man before her. How could she repress her own emotions at a time like this?

"I'll be truthful, Captain Kirk. You once swore to make me love you, and oh, how near you have come to doing it these past few days! Do you believe I can ever love you now, with another dead because you did not even try to save him? If Dane Pitt dies out there, if he does not return to us, I could never forgive that. It would haunt me whenever you came in my sight."

Her arms sank. Her whole being seemed tense as she waited for Kirk to speak.

"If he does return," he asked slowly. "If I should bring him back?"

"Are you that much of a man?"

It was a question that came almost as a gasp through quivering lips, the girl's face uplifted, her eyes shining with the light of her love.

In one step Kirk reached her. His hands sought hers, lifting them to his breast.

"Betty Asher, will you kiss me goodbye?"

It was long they stood there, long that they knew of no life beyond their own, no sorrow save this lingering moment when they were drawn together, only to part. After all it was a thing that had to be, some time; how could they avoid it, how could they deny the forces of love that welled within?

A little later he rode up the river, joined Trooper Tom near the adobe walls and passed on through the village. He rode in silence, staring at his saddle horn, until at last Tom snorted.

"Ain't the bugle blowed yet?"

"Yes," Kirk replied soberly. "It blew taps."

For some time Trooper Tom scowled over this answer.

When they reached a trail through the hills beyond Santa Fe, Kirk drew in his horse and turning, extended one hand.

"Take care of yourself and that girl, Trooper. I give Grant until the Gila River to find out what he's up against. Trail the wagons, but don't show yourself until they're ready to lick your boots! If I have

to go clear up. Night Creek, I'll angle back and connect with you at the Colorado ford. I can make it before you get there with the train. If I'm not around, well, just take them on to California."

A woeful look came into the old warrior's face. He hung his head.

"It's all my cussed, drunken fault. If me an' Yucca Pete hadn't met up and throwed a party I'd never a let Pitt go."

"Forget it, Trooper," Kirk answered. "You've got your job now."

"But I'm tellin' ye, Gin'rel, I don't want him dyin' easy off yonder. We ain't settled between us yet." Tom sat upright with a jerk, his one eye squinting hard. "Gin'rel, would it be too much to ask ye to bring him back, just so I can do whatever finishin' is needed?"

Kirk smiled. "I've already promised Betty I'd bring him back."

"Then be Judas," Tom announced, "me an' the girl is sure pardners!"

They sat a moment in silence. Eastward the sun had climbed to mid-morning. Behind them the little town was in its usual attitude of half-wakefulness, with a herd-boy taking his cows to the river meadows, a goat wandering down the street, and a line of six burros with packs of firewood coming from the hills.

Ahead lay a trail that had its end in a mountain gorge some weeks' riding to the northwest.

"Well, take care of yourself," Kirk repeated, "till the Colorado."

Tom nodded, but made no answer. He sat watching as the lone figure of his captain vanished around a turn of the trail. Then he rode back to Santa Fe, took up a position near the plaza that gave a view of the wagon camp, and waited.

XIII

THE sudden turn of affairs caused some delay in the wagon train's departure, but toward mid-afternoon Grant rode back from the village, bringing a tall, beak-faced, brown-skinned fellow mounted on a fine Spanish sorrel.

Riding to his own outfit, Nate swung to the ground before his wife and introduced the stranger.

"Ma, this is Pancho Flores. He's goin' to be our guide."

The woman looked up at the man, who had not dismounted, and nodded her head. One hand swept to his sombrero as he bowed, too courteously, she thought, smiling in a way she instinctively did not like.

She saw his smile change, the lips loosening as the man's eyes went beyond her. Glancing back, she noticed Betty in the tent opening. The girl stood motionless, curiosity about the stranger suddenly checked as she saw his gloating stare. Her breath caught. She stepped within the tent flaps, pulling them down.

Grant scowled as he spoke to the guide.

"Go ahead, Pancho. We'll be along." He was still displeased when he looked again at his wife. "What's the matter with you women folks? Afraid of a half-breed?"

"I don't like him," Ma answered earnestly. "He ain't the sort we want to have around."

"Well, he ain't goin' to be around, that's just it. There's goin' to be no more mixin' company from now on. I've hired him to lead us, an' he'll stay in his place."

"Will he?"

Nate patted the gun in his belt.

"He will. Don't you go havin' any more notions. The only thing I don't like about him is he gets his pay every night—two dollars gold. But it's the custom in Mexico. Now let's pack up. I aim to get on down the road a piece come dark."

The urge to be moving overrode all else in Nathan Grant. California lay ahead; he wanted to see it, settle down, and begin his new home. That was his objective. The miles between Santa Fe and his land of promise made no difference; in fact, he did not think in terms of distance but time.

He had found the half-breed Pancho in a saloon. The fellow was sober, intelligent, and talked of the country to the west as if he knew it well. Perhaps he did, perhaps not. Grant felt no worry, for in his own estimation he was confident he could take the train across himself. It was the confidence of the pioneer, who sees his goal rising so far above the obstacles that they themselves are invisible to his eyes.

That same spirit in other men had crossed oceans, won wars and conquered worlds. Grant was no less determined.

Preparations complete, the wagons soon strung out, climbed from the river valley, and camped that night on the high table-

land some distance westward of Santa Fe.

They still followed roads where the ox carts from friendly Pueblo Indian villages passed to market. For three days the caravan moved through one after another of the little settlements, surrounded by their patches of cultivated ground. Grant halted each evening in open formation, giving up Kirk's square until they came to hostile Apache country ahead. Pancho agreed it was not needed here.

The breed came to the Grant wagon each night, apparently to receive his two dollars gold, but his visits lengthened; he found many things to explain and his eyes were always on the girl. At last she retreated behind the wagon cover when she saw him coming.

On the fourth morning, as they passed beyond the furthermost Indian hut, the plateau broke abruptly, shelving down to an endless vista of barren hill-ranges, spaced far apart on a gray floor.

And now, entering an unknown land with a guide that Ma Grant's instinct did not trust, and from whom Betty Asher shrank in loathing, more than one family paused in hesitation, with looks of dread on their faces. Here, all knew, the real fight to California had begun.

XIV

DAYS counted into weeks. It had turned close to a month since Santa Fe dropped behind the dust-cloud raised by the wagons. At a pace so slow that men grew restless and climbed from their seats to walk beside the mules, they were ascending the long slope of the Continental Divide.

The rise to the peak of the continent was steady, yet so gentle as to be imperceptible unless someone glanced backward.

On the crest of the divide a cold wind blew, though this was mid-summer, and at night the stars hung low, like points of blue diamonds, to be picked from their black velvet setting by the reach of a man's arm.

Over all brooded a silence so deep that the crack of mule whips sounded like gunfire, and the rattle of wagon wheels could be heard for two miles through the thin air.

Yet the settlers knew at some far-off age there had been people here. Having at last won over the peak and begun the descent westward, they came to the beginning of low hills, and halted often upon strange markings cut into the rocks. Always nearby were lines of crumbled rock walls, plotted on the ground in the plan of rooms.

The emotions of the train revealed themselves in somber looks, in strange glances, in movements that were slow, lifeless. Where had these phantom people come from, where had they gone? Where was the food, the water, the soil that must have given them life? Would the train, too, end like this?

The families were glad when these sights vanished and the train moved into the Gila River country. Nathan Grant, whose stolid nature had felt no fear just because it saw evidences of a lost civilization, now became aware of a problem that was real.

Though there was water in the river, it flowed between sheer rock cliffs, sometimes through a gorge no more than a rod in width but a hundred feet from brink to water-level. For a distance of ten miles along each bank the land was cut by countless ravines, forcing the caravan to make its trail far back from the main canyon.

Not a man in the wagons knew one foot of the country ahead. They traveled westward, for this was the course of the sun. Beyond that they trusted to the lone figure, which day by day rode out in the lead.

Grant's faith in Pancho Flores, however, was breaking. He saw the man was only leading them wherever he found passageway between the heads of divergent ridges, and not directly along a familiar route.

Further back Grant had seen an occasional spot where army scouts had bivouacked. As long as these appeared he felt he was traveling the right way. There had been none since the train first sighted the Gila.

He held his peace for two days longer, then rode forward to join the guide.

"Pancho," he casually drawled, "just how does she lay from here to the Colorado? Sort of rough, or maybe levelin' off further on?"

The breed's eyes shifted beneath his sombrero.

"It's rough country, señor, you can see that. *Sacre Dios!* What's the matter with your wagons?"

"Nothing. They're standin' the trip right well for a bunch of hay-racks."

"Madre Christi! They crawl," Pancho retorted. "Too dam' slow."

"We been follerin' your lead," Grant reminded him.

The other shrugged.

"You think I spend a whole year on this job? For two dollars a day? Maybe it's time you and me make a talk."

"That's just what I been thinkin', Pancho."

"I want more money—six dollars."

"An' if you don't get it?"

"You rot for the coyotes! I quit, go back, and no one in your wagons can get you out of this hell." A wise smile crept over the breed's face. "You know where you are, señor?"

For a full minute Grant sat with his gaze hard upon the man before him. When he spoke it was in a voice that carried his meaning well.

"Yes, Pancho, you're goin' back. You're goin' back by sundown this evenin', or you'll lie here for a long time. See? Led us off'n the trail apurpose, did you? So's to gouge me for more pay to get us on again! If you'd do that, you'd be skunk enough to do most anything. Turn around, you! 'Fore I plug yore yellow belly right here! You've got just about a half hour—then I'll be lookin' to see your dust."

Pancho's hand hesitated on the verge of flight toward his gun. Then slowly it relaxed, his smile came again, and without speaking he whirled back toward the distant wagons.

Grant followed, his own eyes drawn into a puzzled frown. They had not yet come to the head of the train when both involuntarily drew in their mounts, and rode on more alertly, their attention fixed on something beyond the line. It was a solitary rider, a white man Grant knew by the way he sat his running horse. At once a thought of Captain Mallory leaped into his mind. He could not repress the surge of hope.

The rider who swept up from the rear at a gallop until he reached the first wagon was not Kirk. Grant met him, Pancho forgotten in this moment of surprise. It was Jake Howe, one of the four who had gone after Spanish gold.

Grant withheld his question. He saw the man was near exhaustion, his face lined and haggard, his legs unsteady when he swung to the ground. He said only:

"You, Jake! Where's Pitt and your friends?"

"Give me time, Grant. I've rid a hundred mile since morning. Where's Miss Betty? I've brung her this."

He held out a crumpled sheet of paper. A little cry came from the wagon above him, as Betty, hearing her name, looked out of the cover.

"It's yourn," Howe said.

"From . . . from . . ."

Howe nodded.

Grant turned to shout down the string. "Roll up! We'll camp here tonight." Looking again to his wagon, he asked, "Well, girl, what's the—"

Betty had vanished. His eyes followed her figure. He stepped forward, but his wife interfered.

"Let her be, Nate."

"But what is it?"

"Lord knows, and I ain't askin'. She didn't read more'n the first line."

Scowling, Grant went on to bed down his stock, while the woman, with an understanding heart, purposely found an excuse to leave the girl alone.

Even now Betty had not seen more than the first line of the message. Dread closed her eyes, fear held the note but half-opened in her lap; she felt she was going to cry and wanted to be far away to do it. The wagon seemed suffocating. Any moment someone would find her and interrupt the precious memories that welled with hot tears.

Peering out, she saw all others were in the confusion of making camp. No curious eyes were turned her way. She slipped over the tailboard, reached the ground, and walked back through the clumps of juniper that lined the ravine.

Evening had come; soft shadows in a purple mist of sunset; the silence of eternity. On the ridge a coyote began his "yip, yip, yip," ending in a long, plaintive howl. The girl below had heard this cry too often in past months for it to give her more than a momentary chill. She felt no sense of fright, for this was not Indian country, nor a hunting ground for any animals except the cowardly beast up yonder.

Some distance below the wagons she left the trail. Seated on a rock within a shelter of trees, she looked again at the folded paper. Eagnerness to read was checked by

unwillingness to know the truth. She had lived from day to day in the hope that Kirk would come, and now. . . .

A figure moved in the shadows. She drew taut. With the crunch of her own footsteps silenced, she could hear those made by a horseman riding slowly, following her at a walk. Against the darkening ing twilight she saw the still darker face of Pancho Flores, his attempt at a reassuring smile only making more apparent his true purpose.

A cry of terror broke from her lips. He leaped down, his hand covering her mouth, his voice a hoarse whisper.

"Hush, señorita! I'll not harm you. Listen. In a week all these others will be dead, lost because they wouldn't believe me. But you will be in my home beyond the Gila. Ah, señorita, a palace for such a queen!"

She bit at the vile palm. The half-breed's other hand dug into her shoulder.

"A hell-cat, my pretty? When I offer my love, my wealth, everything? You're too good for Pancho Flores? *Madre Dios,* I change all that! Come!"

Desperation gave strength to Betty's struggle. Beating back the face thrust close to hers she freed her mouth, and cried aloud before she was choked again.

In that same instant something else drew the man's attention. His eyes shifted. He turned, and crouching, leaped to his horse, one hand drawing his gun. The weapon was not half-way from its holster when a flash of red brought him rigid for a second. Relaxing, he slumped into a motionless heap.

"Don't look, Miss, don't look! He's dead, I expect. Run on back to the wagons."

The voice was unmistakable, although the speaker was hidden by the trees. Betty could not move.

"Trooper Tom!" she cried. "Come here! Oh, come here!"

Solemn-faced, unperturbed, the old warrior advanced. Betty rushed to him, caught his arm, clung there.

"Is Kirk with you?"

"No'm, Miss. I ain't seen him since Santa Fe. I been trailin' you folks. Saw Jake Howe ride in this afternoon and thought the time had come for me to show myself." Tom looked down at the crumpled form. "Dern. I was waitin' for this lizard to make a move first, but didn't think I'd have to plug him. Guess there ain't nothin' lost. Hadn't we better go back to the wagons?"

Walking together, Tom leading his horse and the dead Pancho's, they turned to the camp, now aglow with many fires. Presently Betty halted.

"I came out here to read a note. Will you wait?"

"From Gin'rel?" Tom demanded.

"Yes."

"Well, sweet Judus, read it! Tell me what it says. I don't know nothin'."

A moment of silence, broken at last by the girl's voice:

"He's going on, following Pitt and Dude Dunham. Something happened at the Spanish Cave when the four reached it . . . a fight. He found Greene dead and Howe wounded."

"I can see 'em," Tom offered. "They ain't the only ones that has fought or killed theirselves when they saw what they'd come after. There she lays, Miss, that Spanish gold, just like they dropped it afore the Injuns came and killed 'em. Little piles of it, in yeller chunks and blocks. But it's fools' gold. No wonder men go crazy, after half-dyin' on the desert to get there! What more does he say?"

"He took care of Howe, then trusted him to find our train to tell me."

Tom nodded. "An' where's Gin'rel goin'?"

"That's just it!" Betty cried. "He doesn't know. He's trailing the other two, alone out there some place. Howe can tell us, perhaps."

Even Tom fell silent, thinking, trying to weigh the chances he knew were against Kirk.

"Is that all?" he asked, as the girl read on but offered nothing.

She folded the note.

"The rest is mine."

MA GRANT stood up from her supper fire with a look of relieved surprise as Trooper Tom and Betty appeared.

"Saints alive! Is it you, now? Well, I'll say I'm glad you're here, but I don't know about Nate."

"Where is he?" Tom asked, shaking hands with her.

"Waterin' the stock." She nodded her head.

"I'll go an' have our meetin' done with right off."

"But you'll set in and eat with us?"

"Well, maybe. That's dependin'."

Seeing Grant at a wagon which carried the water barrels, Tom strolled across, his thumbs hooked into his belt.

"Evenin', Nate."

Grant stared at him.

"What are you doing in this camp? I put you out once, and I meant it. If your blamed captain's back at the wagon I'll shoot him!"

"Easy now!" was Tom's advice. "He ain't there, and you wouldn't do no shootin' if he was. Grant, ain't it about time you saw things as they is?"

"Meaning which?"

Tom told what had happened down the canyon. As Grant listened his face lost some of its bitterness.

"Yore in a bad way," Tom finished. "I'll admit I don't know how far from the right direction that traitor has led ye. I do know y'need someone in this outfit who has crossed here before. Ye hate the army, ye've hated Gin'rel an' me, an' all along it's been the army that got ye through. I'd oughter let ye rot, but for the sake of that girl yonder, who's dead in love with the whitest boy which ever rode the southwest, I'm here offerin' to help again."

All at once Grant's proud shoulders drooped. He held out his hand.

"Trooper Judy, will you shake and be friends?"

"I will so! Else why'd I be sayin' all this?"

A little later Tom sat down to a meal as one of the family at the Grant wagon, for the first time since he had cast his fortunes with the train. Before they had finished, Jake Howe came into the firelight and stood with downcast eyes, his rugged face showing the shame he felt.

"I don't reckon you-all will care for my company," he began, "so before I head out I'd like to tell you what I know."

"Set in, set in," Grant offered. "You've showed you ain't no truck with them others by comin' all the way after us."

Howe's look brightened. He moved in, to sit on the ground.

"I hope the captain does his job, but he was two days behind Pitt and Dunham when he left me at Night Creek. Grant, them two has their eyes on your wagon. Dunham's gone crazy after gold, and Pitt swears he'll have what's comin' to him—meanin' I take it, Miss Betty. Men gets pretty desperate when they've been crossed as many times as them two has. They've got an idea from what Pitt knows of Californy that they'll find some Mexicans over there, who'll be willin' to throw in on waylayin' your train. That's their plan. I don't know what'll come of it, but they've turned mighty hard an' cold-blooded."

"And what do you aim on doin'?" Grant asked.

Howe's gray eyes swept the circle.

"I'd admire to stay by the outfit, an' fight fer ye. That's the way my pap come to Kentucky, afightin'. That's the way I aim to git to Californy, from now on."

Grant nodded. "You're welcome to your old place. Looks like we're going to need every strong hand we can get."

The meal was finished in talk of the way ahead. Presently Howe went to another wagon, Grant walked on his usual round to see the camp was settled, and his wife, ever on the watch for sickness, disappeared down the line with a bottle of pain-killer. Trooper Tom and Betty were alone at the fire.

The presence of this man who was closer than herself, perhaps, to the one she loved, gave the girl new confidence. He had been with Kirk, lived with him, fought with him, shared his most intimate thoughts. It was almost as if she were with Kirk himself.

Crossing from her place she dropped silently beside him on the chuck box. He, too, was silent. He smoked a black pipe, his gaze intent on the flames leaping up from the coals on the ground.

Her hand touched his arm. He turned, looking into her eyes with an expression of surprising gentleness. His voice was low when he spoke.

"Say nothing, Miss Betty. I'm thinkin', too. More'n four year Gin'rel ain't been out'n my sight except maybe for a day. Now he's trailin' off up yonder, God knows where, an' I ain't along to help 'im. I wonder if he'll meet us at the Colorado, like he said?"

Betty shuddered. "When will we reach the Colorado?"

"Well, now," Tom replied, his face turning grim. "That's askin' a heap! I'm goin' ahead tomorrow, and try to find a way out of here, but only the Lord knows where that is."

IT was noon on the second day of Trooper Tom's lone search for a passage out of the Gila badlands. All morning he had ridden west through a succession of ridges, each as barren as the one before it, until there seemed no hope of the Colorado lying in that direction. In the miles he had crossed, his eager gaze had met no sign of life, neither animal nor human, in the barrenness of the desert.

But now, topping a gentle rise which then sloped into the head of a canyon, he stared upon the long-expected growth of willow and mesquite, while far beyond the canyon mouth there hung a ribbon of yellow dust, driven up by the wind storms that continually blew along the valley of the Colorado.

His first feeling of relief ended abruptly. At the moment of his arrival he saw a horseman coming toward him from the distant line of trees. Pulling in his mount he studied the other man. That one too had halted, waited a moment, then whirled into the woods.

Tom felt the act carried a warning, yet before he could turn from his advance, five men rode from the spot into which the one had vanished and swept down upon him, rifles leveled.

He saw at once they were Mexicans and spoke to them in their own tongue. They only shrugged, and covering him, motioned for him to follow.

The way was not far. Even before he broke through the willows, the squealing of many horses and the thud of hoofs sounded from a point nearby, then he came suddenly into the Mexicans' camp. The surprise he felt at seeing the whole canyon bottom filled with animals turned to puzzled wonder when a white man rose and stood waiting.

He was tall and angular, a little stooped, so that his bearded chin nearly touched his shirt front and caused him to look up slantwise when he spoke.

"Soldier," he growled, "yo're in a mighty dangerous place. How come you happen out here, anyway?"

Tom squinted down through one red eye. "Y'ain't American after all. I thought I'd rid into friends."

"American?" the man scoffed. "I'm whatever pays the most money! Right now that's Mex. Get off. You're goin' to answer me a lot of questions."

"An' me too," said Tom. "Mine comin' first. Is yonder the Colorado? Can a wagon train get through the way you've come? I recken ye be out of Californy."

"Wagons?" he man asked, frowning. "Then you ain't with an army?"

"Not since we took Santa Fe."

The leader's hand dropped from his gun. The Mexicans crowded in to listen.

"Soldier, you mean the Army's took Santa Fe?"

"Yep. An' the war's the same as done."

"Well, God a Mighty! Here's three hundred head of horses, and now they're not worth a damn."

Tom waved his hand toward the herd.

"You was takin' them to General Santa Anna, I reckon? Well, the general must be plumb in Mexico City from the way he was trailin' it after we whipped him at the Purgatory."

The man nodded. All at once his bluster vanished. "Oh, gosh!" he sighed. Then, "Well, soldier, come down and have a drink."

Tom accepted gladly, drank good California wine, and was given a square meal from the leader's chuck box. The man was not unfriendly, only the sort who was willing, as he admitted, to throw in with whatever side would pay the most. He said his name was Bunker.

After eating, Tom lay stretched on the ground in a moment of comfort.

"Well, Bunker," he said at last, "you've treated me white anyways, now I'll be the same. What are ye plannin' to do with the horses? Take 'em back to Californy?"

"Critters don't bring two-bits apiece out there. I've been on the road with 'em for a month. It ain't worth back-trailin'."

Tom nodded. "Then if I'd promise a dollar a head would you deliver about twenty that's wagon-broke to the train in yonder?"

"How fur?"

"Couple a days."

"Better'n nothin'," Bunker agreed.

Tom stood up. An hour ago he could

not have sat his saddle through the afternoon. Now all things were different.

"Round 'em up," he said. "An' let's ride."

THERE was little hope left in the group of families after three times watching the sunset bare the Gila's teeth, while they were helpless to move.

Then miracle swept down upon them . . . twenty horses, and Trooper Tom shouting that he had seen the Colorado. This was on the morning of the fourth day. When Grant had paid this promised price, and the horses were distributed to the carts whose mules had died, there was a rush to roll on.

The urge grew more from what Tom had said than from the sight of fresh animals. The news was often repeated as the carts jolted along, "He saw California. One of us has looked on Paradise!"

For a time the way was less difficult, as the caravan followed in a path broken by the band of horses. When they were beyond the herder's camp the hoofs of three hundred animals had left almost a road.

Acting on Bunker's advice, Tom led one animal unsaddled, and with only a short rope on her neck. She was a gaunt gray mare, hard-limbed and framed with bones that showed in ridges beneath her hide. Her udder bags were not yet emptied from recent foaling.

"That's old Jazzabel," Bunker said. "We took her from Warner's Ranch and left her colt. Never seen such a critter, fightin' us all the way. Ef you git yourselves lost just turn Jazzabel loose. She won't stop till she finds her baby."

So the lines moved on toward the Colorado, feeling that their troubles were ended. Only Trooper Tom and the Grant family knew what word Jake Howe had brought from Night Creek. Others felt at ease.

"When we reach the river," was the constant thought, "we can look across to California."

The old cry rose from many carts, "Hooray fer California! On to Paradise!"

"It's all trees and flowers," a women said.

"Yep," her man answered. "An' ye just set an' watch things grow. Eight crops a year, I've heard tell. Git up thar, critters, ye'll soon be wadin' in clover!"

"There's monkeys in the woods," a boy added. "Mamma, can I have a monkey?"

"You, Ambrose! Don't let me catch you with one of them horrid apes!"

"But mamma."

"Hush now!"

"Oh, let the kid dream," the man interfered. "Ain't we dreamin' too?"

That afternoon they reached the river.

"California!" someone shouted, but the voice was weak and suddenly died.

In silence the carts drew into a line at the water's edge, all eyes staring across to the promised land.

California? Paradise? That yonder? Each step westward they had come into worlds more desolate, more barren of life, yet always with the one hope—wait till California. Now they gazed upon it; utterly bleak, sand hills that rolled away north, south, west, lakes of desert heat quivering across a white-hot sky; before them the muddy waters of the Colorado. Paradise?

Grant was first to see disaster threatening in his train. He rode to where Tom stood watering his horse.

"For God's sake, Trooper! I'm feeling as low as the rest, but we can't quit here. Go and say this ain't California. Tell them anything to keep them up."

Tom obeyed. Walking among the families he laughed and lied to the full extent of his imagination.

"This ain't California," he ended. "Hell, no! The Mexicans have just called anything from the Colorado to the Pacific by that name. We've got a little more desert to cross, then you see it all of a sudden. Now let's get over the river."

Despair was not in the hearts of the settlers alone. For weeks Betty Asher had ridden with her eyes toward the Colorado, not to see the beginning of California, nor Paradise, but searching for the one whose absence had made life unbearable.

"At the Colorado," was the promise in his note.

She had read it countless times, and looked and waited just till the river bank. Bitterness against herself had come often. In spite of the truth in what Kirk had said, she knew she need not have let him go; she could have taken him then without proof.

He wanted the man's way to end things, fighting. Perhaps he was right and that

was the only way, but if he did not come back. . . . She dared not voice the questions that rose in her mind. If he had not come this far, then where were he and the other two? Could they have met and fought to the end of all?

Cold terror swept over her. She pleaded with Grant to wait.

"Just one more day. He might come! Oh, I can't go on!"

"There now, girl," Grant replied. "If he comes he'll follow our tracks. We can't stop. I'd like to, but there's no feed for the animals nor ourselves."

She nodded, and fought to regain the courage shown by the others who were again preparing to move. Yet there was no life in her body, no hope in her mind. Paradise might still lie ahead of the families; for her there was only desert.

Since the river at the ford was spread out over a quarter of a mile in the valley bottom, it was nowhere more than hub deep on the carts. The crossing was made, barrels filled, and by sundown the train had reached the edge of the salt basin.

It was here next day that old Jazzabel took the lead, for even Trooper Tom was baffled by the constantly changing face of the region where windstorms left no sign of trails as they threw up miles of dunes or removed them in a single year.

Jazzabel lifted her head high when Tom released her, whinnied one long call, then stood for a moment waiting. The men who listened heard nothing, saw nothing save the endless stretch of sand. Yet the mare was satisfied. With muzzle lowered she plodded on.

XV

A WHITE man sat on the steps of the veranda at Warner's. Behind him the adobe walls of the ranch house showed barren patches through the whitewash. Many boards of the veranda floor were loose and warped. The whole place seemed in a stage of neglect and poverty.

Poverty was evident, too, in the man's clothing. He wore only a pair of canvas trousers torn off at the knee, a blue shirt without buttons, and a straw hat. His feet were bare, but hard as leather. His great, hairy arms, folded across an equally matted chest, were adorned with tattooed pictures of sailor's knots, anchors, and a nude woman poised above the British flag.

The planks where he sat should have been those on the deck of some ship, not part of a rancho which was the furthermost white habitation in California's southern desert. Yet ten years had passed since he last saw the ocean. He had deserted from one of the Royal Navy's ships, to reach this island of green, in a vast sea of brown wasteland, by various turns of fortune.

The Mexicans called him "Señor Beel," for Bill was all he knew of his own name. In ten years he had not learned their language, but he had quickly taken up one habit. That was to sit for hours warming his back against any convenient wall.

Bill scowled. His hairy fists clenched. The curse he might have uttered was halted by a sudden call from down the road, as an Indian boy astride a brown mule came out of the oaks.

"Señor Beel," he cried. "Look!"

Bill stood up, scanning the road beneath a raised palm, then swore a mighty oath.

"Jazzabel!" he ended. "Dam' old nag. Damme if it ain't!"

His surprise mounted swiftly, wonder turning to disbelief in his own eyes. Behind the horse came a string of carts, their tops in shreds, wheels askew, drivers humped like dead men, but following in a steady parade down from the hills, across the flat land of the rancho, and to the very gates of the house.

Not until then would Bill admit this sight was anything but the result of his drinking too much *tequila*. But there they were, carts halted, men yelling to him. He walked slowly down to meet them, hands in his pockets, a queer smile on his red face. Someone was crazy as hell; if not himself, then these others!

Bill's wonder was no less than that of the men in the train. Here was a great ranch. They had passed its first fence line a mile back. Now they came to this mansion with barns and corrals. Yet the grinning sailor with an Indian boy seemed the only living souls about.

It was Trooper Tom who spoke first, leading his horse to the gate where the man had stopped.

"This is Warner's, ain't it?" he asked.

"What's left," Bill answered. "So yer a honest-to-Gawd human! I been waitin'

to hear yer voice. Didn't believe it. Sweet Agnes, where'd ye come from?"

"I'll answer directly," Tom said. "But if we can have grub all around and feed for our animals, we'll be much obliged and pay well for the same."

Bill's mouth gaped. "For that outfit?" A chuckle rocked his shoulders. "I shot a rabbit yesterday, and before that my Jasper here caught a crow. If God is good there's still some mice in the barn. Why, even old man Warner quit the place last month and ain't come back yet."

Nathan Grant rode up.

"You mean, friend, there's nothing to eat on this ranch?"

"Looks that way, don't it? The Mexicans cleaned us once, and just this week another gang finished what they'd left. Country's gone lower'n hell when white men come in and steal from their own kind."

"What's that?" Tom demanded. "White men?"

"Yeah. Two of 'em got a bunch of *cholos* laid up in the valley on the road to San Diego. Been stealin' and raisin' general hell thereabouts."

Tow swung to Nate Grant. "What did Howe tell us!"

"It's them, I reckon," Grant agreed. "What'll we do now? We can't stay here. There ain't even horse feed. And if we go on . . . ."

"Say, friend," Tom asked, turning again to Bill, "if I'm right, there's one road to San Diego, and another to San Gabriel, and from then on to Los Angeles. Ain't that so?"

"Keep straight ahead for Los Angeles," Bill answered. "Sorry there's nothin' to offer you here. You musta come through hell. Them carts . . ." Bill paused, stared, gasped. "Sweet Lord above, women! You're farmers, come clean acrost the country?"

While Bill was recovering from the unbelievable sight, Tom spoke to Grant.

"If we light out now, takin' the upper road instead of the one to San Diego, and keep goin' in the dark, we may get through before we've been discovered. What I don't see is, if it's Pitt and Dunham, where's Gin'rel?"

"They might have got him," Grant offered.

"Like hell! He's somewhere's. We might as well go on. Pitt's bound to play his hand sooner or later. What y' say?"

Grant drew himself erect in his saddle. He had long ago passed into that state when nothing in the future could seem worse than the present. He now drove ahead like a lumbering bull that wounded, blinded, still plunges into a fight as long as there is blood to bear him up.

Before leaving the ranch Tom made a bargain with Bill the sailor. He traded a chew of cut plug for the services of the Indian boy, whom he then mounted on one of Grant's horses and sent with a note to the first settlement on the road to Los Angeles.

From the tree-covered slopes at Warner's the carts again moved into brown hills, but they followed a road now, and progress was faster than at any time since the Santa Fe Trail. Through the night they traveled northwest, then on into the afternoon of another day, without sign of trouble from the rumored outlaw band which they expected.

Grant thought perhaps ruse of changing trails had worked, and expressed this belief when Tom returned from an hour's scouting to the rear.

"We've either slipped through or they're afraid."

Tom surveyed him steadily.

"It's nuther, Grant. I seen 'em comin' off yonder from the San Diego road. I wasn't sure, and no need of throwin' a scare into the carts, but soon's we're through this pass we'll make our stand for a scrap."

They rode on in silence, Grant beckoning with a wave of his hat for the carts to catch up, Trooper glancing uneasily toward the crest of hills on their south flank.

"I hope you're wrong," Grant said at last. "There's not another fight left in this train."

The words were scarcely uttered when Tom whirled his horse to face about.

"There ain't?" he retorted. "Then, by Judas, you farmers had better start diggin' your graves. Look!"

Over the southern rim, still a mile distant, yet hard against the sky, there came a cloud of dust that hung for a moment, wavered, then broke into a band of horsemen riding at a run.

XVI

FOR the last two hundred miles of the chase from Night Creek, Kirk had known the distance between himself and the pair ahead was steadily decreasing. Now, encamped after dark on the western bank of the Colorado, he was prepared to close down upon them at dawn.

The fire burned low; yet Kirk lay motionless, lost in dreaming.

Out of a stupor that bordered on sleep he heard the low whinny of his horse from the darkness up the river bank, then a rush of its breath, as if a hand had suddenly closed on its nostrils.

Kirk remained motionless, feeling by instinct that he was watched from above. Through half-opened eyes he studied the land around him. There was a deep shadow not more than an arm's length away from him.

His muscles tensed, feet and hands pressing hard against the earth. With all his strength thrown into a sudden shove, he hurled himself into that black patch, rolling to the cottonwoods beyond.

Even as he moved, a gun blazed in the night. A slug of lead buried itself where he had lain.

Leaping up in the protection of the trees, he whirled to answer the shot, at the same time whistling a shrill note that his horse knew well. There came a crash of hoofs in the willows, a man's curse. The animal ran out with head lifted, eyes staring across the campfire.

Kirk waited, listening as a rattle of brush from two separate directions told the men were in hasty retreat. When the sounds had died he called to his horse, mounted, and rode in a circle from the river, coming presently upon the spot where two lines of hoof marks struck together and continued west. Even in the dim starlight he could see the animals had been pushed at a run.

He halted, and sat for some time following the tracks with his eyes. So the pair were not as far ahead as he had thought! They would not come back tonight, he decided, but would try to throw him off in a race across this last stretch of desert.

An hour before dawn he proved his guess correct, when half a mile from his camp he found where the two had stopped. The ashes of their fire were cold, and there were signs of a quick departure made some hours ago. Driving on, Kirk held his horse at a jog trot. Let them kill their mounts, he decided. It would only bring them sooner into his hands.

FOR two days those ahead held the pace, the trail showing Kirk had not gained. They struck across a desert that dropped down until its floor was spotted with salt pit, stretching out like miles of snow. Even Kirk, accustomed to hard riding, felt faint at times from the burning sun, the glare from underfoot, the stifling heat. Hoarding his supply of water, he wondered if the two fools knew their way out of this hell.

He rode on; rode throughout the hours of that day, through the night, and past another dawn, until the desert reeled before his eyes and the Sierra Madre took on unreal shapes, advancing to meet him, towering ever higher as if to fall upon his head; or suddenly retreating, seemed to vanish over the desert's rim.

He rode on; now with his legs strapped to the saddle guard and his hands tied to the pommel, for there were hours when he knew nothing save a blinding torment that seethed in his body, into his mind, to blot out at last all knowledge that he lived.

There was Arab strain in the horse beneath him, blood that had known a thousand years of desert, then mixed with the wild mustang of the new world produced a beast of unconquerable strength and courage. Sometimes at a walk, sometimes breaking into an easy lope, led by a cool smell that came with puffs of night wind, the animal approached the mountain range. At last it climbed the first line of foothills and halted in a deep canyon.

The horse buried his muzzle in a stream, and when finished with that turned to the patches of wild clover. The figure on his back hung limp and did not move.

Darkness came again. Often the horse flicked an inquiring ear toward the silent master, or with his mouth full of grass looked to see if the saddle could not be taken off, so he could have his usual roll.

For some time he grazed upward. As the morning sun tipped the Sierra Madre he stood on the highest ridge that dropped beyond into a great valley.

Soothing winds came with the dawn;

there was life in the sun's warmth. A shudder racked the body of the man bound in his saddle, a groan escaped from parted lips, then the eyes opened.

Kirk saw only the high-lights of the new day as a moment of consciousness swept over him. There were green trees, mountain tops, and a vaguely familiar valley far below. From down the slope came the ring of axes on wood, mingled with shouts. He kicked his horse, heading him toward the sound before the stupor came again.

PADRE VALESCO, from the San Gabriel Mission, sat on a boulder above the canyon stream, the hood of his brown robe thrown back, his eyes fixed on a band of his Christianized Indians. They were hewing logs for a new house at the school.

It would be a fine house, the padre was thinking, many rooms, stone fireplaces, a tile roof, all done by these workers yonder who only a few years past roamed the hills as savages.

Then Valesco frowned. Why build a house, why teach the Indians, why do anything more if rumors were true? The Americans had taken California. Now they would loot and plunder whatever had wealth. Not even the Missions would be spared, according to report. God's curse upon them!

Suddenly his brow lifted. He turned his eyes up the slope. The Indians, too, had heard, and stood gripping their axes as the tramp of a horse drew near. When it came out of the woods they stared in wonder, until Padre Valesco, clapping his hands, sent one of them to halt the animal, while he himself ran to support the figure on its back.

He thought at first it was one of his own countrymen, for the man's skin was brown and a long stubble hid his face. But then, cutting the thongs and lifting the unconscious burden to the ground, he observed first a uniform, after that the light hair. An *Americano!*

The padre's spirit was that of a savior. No human being would go unaided. Ordering the timbers thrown from his ox-cart, he made a couch of fern leaves, and laying the stranger on it went hastily down the canyon and out upon the road to San Gabriel.

He walked ahead. Presently a Mexican youth joined him, made a gesture of loathing toward the cart, and asked, "Why save a dog, Father? It is only for him to make us more trouble."

"You forget, Juanito!" Valesco answered severely. "While he suffers we must give him care."

"Yes, Father, but when he is well, and walks about?"

Valesco shrugged in reply. Preachment against what might happen then was not part of his holy duty.

XVII

"MISBEGOTTEN curs! That is what we can expect when the Americans come!"

Kirk turned on a bed of skins, opened his eyes, and stared wonderingly about. He had only a vague knowledge of where he was, gained from previous occasions when he had been roused from the sleep of exhaustion as a burning fluid was being put down his throat.

But now, rested, strengthened, he was alive at once, brought forcefully alert by the note of threat in the speaker's voice.

Propping himself on one elbow, he saw a figure near his open window. It was this one who had spoken, yet the man's gaze was fixed on something outside in the plaza.

Kirk sat up. There was no weakness from the hard trail after this rest. He secured his uniform from a peg on the wall and donned it. Still the figure did not turn toward him.

"Señor!" he called, walking across the room. *"Buenos dias."*

Padre Valesco swung sharply, his face marked with bitter lines.

"Ha! You can say it is a good day. But what of us? See? That is what we can expect from you Americans!"

Kirk looked beyond the window, paused, and his own expression became hard.

A body of Stockton's sailor-soldiers had come into the plaza, drunk with stolen wine, swaggering into shops, even into homes where they took what they wanted —running from place to place, shouting, roaring with laughter as they herded terrorized peons before them.

At the casino they met resistance from the Mexican gamblers, and soon a volley of gun-shots mingled with their wild cries.

"Padre!" Kirk asked. "How long has this been going on?"

"All night. Who is to stop it? We are helpless before conquerors."

Kirk flung the pair of dragoon revolvers around his waist.

"I'll stop it, Padre! I'll return what you have done for me. Those out there are only drunken fools."

He strode from the room where he had lain, breaking into a run as he crossed the plaza. At the open door of the casino he halted as he saw a grinning tar leap to a table, with a wine bottle raised in one hand. Below him a game-keeper cringed in terror.

A shot from Kirk's gun shattered the bottle. The roar brought all eyes in his direction.

"Back, you swabs! Attention, there! One move, sailor, and it's your brains next!"

The voice of command penetrated even wine-crazed heads. The mob stood fixed. Kirk advanced, the gold braid of his rank glittering in the sunlight.

"Who's in charge here?"

One stepped forward, saluting.

"I am, sir. Ensign Gregg, frigate Portsmouth. We're an advance detail awaiting Commodore Stockton."

Scorn twitched at Kirk's face.

"Then what kind of officers do they have in the Navy? Captain Mallory speaking. I have come with dispatches from Kearny to Stockton. He'll be here? Then square yourself for what these men have done and do it quick. I'll say nothing of what I've seen."

Gregg smiled his relief. "The devil himself couldn't hold this pack, Captain. They haven't had a fight for three months."

"Oh, sure, I know," Kirk replied.

Glad of this first chance in weeks to talk with one of his own countrymen, he exchanged news with Gregg, striking up a friendship, while the mob of tars went about the plaza replacing what loot, doors, and fence gates they had not destroyed.

Padre Valesco came from the mission and joined the two officers. His hand fell on Kirk's shoulder.

"God be with you, Captain. You give us hope. Perhaps we can expect fair treatment from the Americans after all." He paused, extending a folded bit of paper. "This was just delivered by an Indian boy, riding in from Warner's ranch. It is written in English."

As Kirk grasped the letter his thoughts leaped by habit to the wagon train. Then he saw a familiar scrawl:

Wagons from Leavenworth needing help. Heading for trouble beyond Warner's. If an American reads this give it to the soldiers.

Trooper Tom Judy, 1st Dragoons, U. S. A.

"Gregg!" Kirk asked, "are your bullies mounted? Can they ride?"

"They haven't been afloat for a year. They're soldiers now. What is it, a fight?"

"Yes. I'll explain as we go. For the Lord's sake snap them up!"

The blare of a bugle call "to horse" sent the tars running to their mounts. In five minutes they swept away from San Gabriel in a shouting, blood-thirsty pack.

FIVE months on the southwest trail had taught the Missouri farmers how to fight. Only death could whip them. Though fatigued and discouraged, they could still shoot with unerring aim, while as long as blood flowed in their bodies it was hot with courage.

They had met the band of Mexicans led by white traitors with such withering fire on the first attack that another had not been made until after dark. Through the night they had stood their ground against forms that crept out of the darkness from all directions.

Dawn came. Gray shapes gathered on the hill like coyotes. Most of the farmers' guns were silenced from lack of powder. The men stood waiting with knives unsheathed. Women shrank beneath the ribbon of the cart tops. The camps were silent.

The band on the hill was creeping down, coming on more swiftly as it saw the farmers were no longer using their guns.

From the center of the crowd rode two white men, making straight for the Grant cart, as the rest, mounted and afoot, charged in with knives drawn, yelling like the fiends they were.

Not even the families had discovered that other troop, riding up from the darker

depths of the canyon bottom where daylight had not yet touched, until bellowed roars from the throats of Gregg's men drowned the yelping Mexicans, and a wave of American tars swept through the renegades.

The bullies had been spoiling for a fight. They made the most of it now, beating back the Mexicans, running them down, pursuing them into the hills.

Out of the mixed rush of horsemen came one alone, Captain Kirk, racing behind a man who had almost reached the Grant outfit.

Kirk had singled out Pitt on first approaching the camp, yet had not been able to reach him until the Mexicans retreated. Now, with not more than twenty paces between them, he knew he could halt him with a shot, but his gun remained in its scabbard. He rode with bare hands reaching out, came abreast of the other man, clutching him. Locked together they fell in a struggling heap.

A moment, and the fight was over. Pressing Pitt upon the ground, Kirk half rose, waiting. He saw the look of terror leap to the man's eyes, and said at last through clenched teeth:

"No, Pitt, I won't kill you! I'm going to let you see what a court trial is like. Your end will be the same anyway. Now get up!"

Yes, his fight was won. But the satisfaction of this was lifted to greater joy when he saw Trooper Tom returning from a chase over the ridge. Their words when they met were gruffly spoken, their looks betrayed to no one what they felt.

Kirk said:

"Take this prisoner and deliver him in San Gabriel—unharmed."

"Wish I'd had your chance a minute ago," Tom growled. "Here, you, Passin', come along!"

Kirk rode ahead, reached the Grant wagon, and swung to the ground. Now that the moment had almost come for which he had lived through weeks of desert trails, he felt unsteady, and paused with one foot raised to the wheel.

"Betty Asher?"

His voice was low, yet at the first sound of it the cover flaps parted. There came only a gasp as a little figure fluttered over the end board and leaped down beside him.

"Kirk!"

No more was said. Words were useless now.

BY mid-morning the wagons were rolling west again, down from the pass, across a great valley that was rimmed to the north by high mountains, and on toward San Gabriel. Now they could see the end of their road. Here was California.

Seeing the caravan well started, Kirk rode to the Grant wagon and said, "I've got to ride up with dispatches for Commodore Stockton. He's coming to the Mission."

Betty looked out at him.

"Then your horse will have to carry double. I'm going too."

Without waiting for his answer she climbed into the saddle and sat upon his knees, then called back to Mother Grant, "We'll meet you in San Gabriel."

Kirk rode swiftly, anxious to have his long ride ended, a little worried, too, for fear the dispatches might contain orders that would tear him from his happiness.

He rode directly to the commodore's quarters, dismounting there with Betty at his side.

"Dispatches from General Kearny, sir," he said, saluting. "I am Captain Mallory, unattached."

The commodore smiled, his eyes on the girl.

"Unattached to the army, you mean?" Upon opening the packet, he turned grave at once. Kirk thought it was a long time before he looked up, chuckling: "You're an incompetent officer, are you?"

"So a court-martial found," Kirk answered. "I was given time to prove it wrong."

"And you have!" the commodore finished. "Here; you may read these dispatches from General Kearny. Then if you have a more important matter to accomplish, you may wait a week before assuming your new California command."

Kirk saluted, feeling the sudden pressure of Betty's fingers upon his left arm.

"Thank you, sir! I do have something important."

Smiling, Stockton walked to the door with them. There he held out his hand.

Good luck to you—Colonel."

THE CANNONS OF THE MOUNTED

By SAMUEL ALEXANDER WHITE

This yarn swings us back more than half a century to the days when the Royal Canadian Mounted Police was more a crack regiment of cavalry than it was a regular police force. But even in those days the R. C. M. P. believed in getting its man.

"WHAT rumbling's been going on all night, Raoul?" demanded Alec Nash as he rose from his blanket in the Qu'Appelle River pull-out.

The pull-out was a base camp where the Mounted Police column bound out of Fort Ellice for Fort Carlton could get into marching order after detaching a detail to be left at Ellice under the command of Sergeant Hume.

"I'm afraid it's bison," observed Belcourt gravely.

As guides to the Mounted Police, Nash and Belcourt were the first to wake, but they were only a moment ahead of Belcourt's daughter Louise and Sergeant Hume. From her own tent flap Louise emerged in dark, silk skirt and woven shawl, to bathe her face in the springs which Nash had discovered for the column's water supply. At the ominous shaking of the earth Alec stopped her.

"Don't go down there yet, Louise," he begged, laying a restraining hand on her arm.

"You think it's a herd?" asked Hume, joining them.

His huge, broad figure loomed beside the three, his clean-shaven, fleshy face mahogany-tanned, wrinkled into serious lines as his eyes strove to pierce the misty valley.

"There they are," cried Nash, as sun and wind struck in together and the nebulous mist went out like smoke.

"Acres and acres of them!" broke out Hume.

Away to the northwestward, as far as the eye could range, the black mass covered the country. It moved steadily south and east, the foremost bison crowding thirstily down the coulee to the springs.

"They've come off the Salt Plain," declared Belcourt. "The herd extends for miles."

"Yes, and where there's a herd like that the halfbreed hunters are not far away," Nash asserted. "Jean Bruxelles, his *metis*, and his friendly Sioux will be hanging on their flanks. We're in for double trouble, Sergeant, if we don't get a move on."

"Confound Jean Bruxelles!" chafed the sergeant. "I thought I would have had him in Fort Ellice barracks by this time. The word will go out all over the west that he defied the law, nearly shut the Mounted Police column out of the Fort, and left a redder stain on the Troop sergeant-major's uniform."

Hume rubbed a slowly healing shoulder in grim remembrance. "But the column travels on your wisdom, Alec," he went on hurriedly. "What's the word?"

"March!" Nash told him. "That's the word. Tell the Inspector. Warn the men

not to fire a shot. Go about things soft-foot, or somebody will start a stampede. Raoul and I'll keep the springs open long enough to draw water."

Together Alec and Belcourt slipped around the rim of the coulee, and very quietly crowded the leaders back from the springs, so that the Mounted men could draw water for themselves and the animals. The camp watched tensely, half expecting to see the vast herd trample Raoul and Nash underfoot and plunge on over tents and wagons. The young bulls showed fire at the crowding. They pranced and tossed their heads as if about to lower them for a charge. The water-drawers breathed with relief as they filled the last cask and heaved it onto the wagons.

For a short minute the Inspector and Sergeant Hume conferred with Alec Nash.

"What about the advance guard, this time?" asked the Inspector.

"Don't send it out," Nash warned. "And don't leave any rear guard stringing out."

"Open or closed marching order?"

"Closed," advised Nash. "Bang up, tight. Wagons nose to tailboard. Gun carriages jammed together. No hole where a young bull can squeeze through."

"All right," nodded the Inspector. "You're in charge of the transport as usual, Hume. Have them snatch a bite of breakfast and start them out."

Almost immediately the wagon train pulled off on the trail. Nash on his mount Plains Burner, and Sergeant Hume on his black charger, Night Hawk, rode at the head. Belcourt, choosing a place of greater safety for Louise, rode at the rear. All the animals were in the train along with the wagons and guns. The men filed beside. Boring a lane through the immense herd, they went, the bison bellowing close but affording them sufficient room to pass.

"You sure have the wisdom of the plains in that young head of yours, Alec," exulted Sergeant Hume as he rode along. "Your plan works. It makes a road, all right. I confess I was a bit anxious back yonder."

"The only trouble is that others will use the road," brooded Nash. "This lane dividing the herd will stay open for a long way in our rear, and may—"

A bugle interrupted. It was the rear guard calling the advance guard.

"Raoul's sighted something," Alec observed.

"Must be horsemen," deduced Hume. "Nobody would wade into this mess afoot."

Amid the thunderous rumble of the bison's movements, the sharper beat of horses' hooves cut like a drum-rattle. Nash put his toe on his riding pad and stood erect on Plains Burner's back. In the rear he glimpsed the dangerous highway full of halfbreed and Sioux riders. At their head careened Jean Bruxelles, and the young chief Burning Wind.

"Here's our double trouble, Sergeant," he observed grimly, dropping back to his seat.

"Just the man I'm after," Hume snapped.

He wheeled Night Hawk. Like a team the black and Plains Burner galloped back along the train.

"What are you doing here?" they heard Raoul Belcourt demanding of the riders.

"We hunt the buffalo on the hunting grounds of our fathers," answered Burning Wind proudly.

"And welcome the chance to speak to old friends," laughed Bruxelles casting his bold, admiring eyes on Louise. "We are very popular on the plains. Look at the haste of Alec Nash and Sergeant Hume to greet us."

Plains Burner and Night Hawk drew up at the rear, blocking the narrow, open path alongside the train. Hume leaned from his saddle and seized Jean's horse by the rein.

"You're under arrest, Bruxelles!"

Jean swung his body to the right, arm extended. It was the buffalo hunter's signal for his horse to turn. The pinto wheeled right. Like a flash Jean leaned the opposite way. His mount wheeled left, jerking the agitated bridle thong out of Hume's grip.

Bruxelles whirled his pony on all fours to gallop away, but Nash was a shrewder hunter than Jean. With a spoken word to Plains Burner, Alec jumped his superb runner over the rear wheels of the last wagon, crowding Burning Wind aside, and cut off the halfbreed leader's flight.

Sergeant Hume seized the opportunity

Alec gave him. He spurred Night Hawk against Bruxelles, and gripped Jean round the waist. Half pulled off his horse, Bruxelles swung his rifle round, but the barrel, lodged between the two wrestling bodies, went off in the air.

Instantly the nearest buffalo stampeded at the shot. They crowded their fellows, sending the whole, immense herd into swift action. Where they had moved sedately all along, they now charged wildly. Lanes opened and closed in their ranks with magical celerity. A rock in the rapids of the thundering river of flesh, the wagon train halted dead.

Several young bulls swerved against Hume and Bruxelles as they struggled, forcing Night Hawk and the pinto apart. With a desperate effort Jean twisted out of the sergeant's embrace, and jumped his horse into one of the open lanes. *Metis* and Sioux had done the same. Threading the milling herd, they rode like madmen, firing into the flanks of the speeding beasts.

The bison barrier shut Bruxelles away from Hume. With an imprecation the sergeant wheeled Night Hawk clear of the crowding bulls.

"Look out, there's another," Nash warned.

Hume swung aside just in time to escape the lowered head of a scarred veteran of the plains. The old bull went by like a locomotive. He missed Plains Burner by inches, at the prairie runner's skilful turn. Alec twisted his head to see him bear down on the rear wagon. There Raoul Belcourt was fighting the crowding herd, firing like the *metis* and Sioux to clear the rear end of the train. Louise was left alone, and one glance told Nash her danger. Live buffalo on both sides, and dead buffalo heaped to Raoul's swift bullets, jammed girl and horse in against the wagon. With a frenzied shout to her, Alec jumped Plains Burner onto the old bull's heels.

Crash! The buffalo veteran struck the wagon in the center. His terrific momentum carried him under the wagon-reach and bolster. The tongue broke. The loaded wagon tilted high in air on its two rear wheels.

White-faced, frantically tugging at her jammed horse's rein, Louise saw it careen to bury her. But even as it careened she saw the flash of Plains Burner's sleek hide at the front end.

High in air on Plains Burner's back, Nash seized a front wheel. The moment his hand closed on the rim he leaned back in his seat. The backward motion of his body was the plains hunter's command to his mount to lie down. Like a flash Plains Burner dropped to earth. The weight of man and horse on the careening wagon stopped it in the act of overbalancing. It righted itself and came down, four-wheeled, on top of the grizzled, roaring old bull.

Kicking, smashing, the veteran bison heaved in a rage. All he could see in his trap was the horse, and Louise at his nose. He scrambled and gored toward them inch by inch, his hot breath, and dust and bellowing beating into Louise's face.

Nash thrust his rifle between the wagon spokes as Plains Burner rose again, and fired for the heart. Stone-dead, the old bull collapsed under the tail-board.

A shift of bison bodies gave Nash a little room. He drew Louise's horse out of the jam by the rein, and held it close beside Plains Burner.

"That's a sample," he breathed, half to Louise, half to Hume, near at hand. "Jean's game is to turn the whole maddened herd onto us."

"Any place to stand them off hereabouts?" asked the anxious sergeant.

"Poplar islands in the quicksands—that's the only refuge I know. Yonder's one by the next coulee. I might bridge a path across."

"Go on and bridge," directed Hume. "I'll form some sort of square to face them.

Alec seized an ax protruding from the rear wagon. Still holding tight to Louise's rein, he edged both horses out of the crush beyond the next coulee.

The country around Fort Ellice, both along the Assiniboine and the Qu'Appelle, was spotted with treacherous stretches of oozy turf which would not support the weight of a horse. Bison and Indian ponies sensed these traps instinctively, and would not set a hoof on them. For this reason Nash chose the softest spot, where he knew quicksands lurked underneath.

"They won't cross here," he told Louise.

"Hold both horses tight while I drop some trees."

The higher, undulating bluffs favored the growth of aspen and poplar. Burned off the open plains by the Indian hunters who fired the dead grass in autumn so that the buffalo would come to the fresh green tracts in spring, the trees were making their last stand, like oases in a desert, on the water-bordered mounds. Nash's ax rang into the soft wood. Tall poplars swayed and splashed into the ooze, bridging a path to the largest island at hand.

While Nash bridged the quicksands, Sergeant Hume turned both ends of the long wagon train down on him. The column moved again in a sort of mobile square. Fronting the bellowing bison, it backed for its poplar island refuge.

From afar in the dusty hunting lanes, *metis* and Sioux marked the move. Jean Bruxelles galloped back and forth like a demon, urging his breeds and Indian allies into a concerted effort. Riding and firing like a savage army, they bore down on the island, with a thousand frenzied buffalo charging in front.

Some of the wagons had crossed Nash's bridge. Others were in the act. Still others moved in their turn toward the corduroy.

"Cross quickly, Louise!" yelled Nash, throwing down his ax and seizing his rifle. "Leave me Plains Burner."

Neck-reining her own horse, Louise thundered over. With a shout of appreciation to Alec, Raoul Belcourt galloped after. Nash mounted Plains Burner, and shoved through the crowd to where Sergeant Hume was hurrying down the last wagons.

"Can't make it," Nash calculated.

"Maybe big guns will hold them," growled Hume. "First chance I've had to use one without opening the train."

At his word a driver swung a gun carriage into position. The gunner sprang to his breechlock.

"Touch off!" nodded the sergeant.

The bog quaked to the report. The aspen leaves quivered. The gunner sighted too high, clear over the swaying bison backs. Nash and Hume saw a swathe suddenly cut through the flying pony legs of Sioux and *metis*.

"Drop her!" Hume cried.

The gunner sighted low. His shot landed into the leading knot of young bulls. Down they went, tripping the legs of those pressing behind. A tangle of heaving bison bodies piled up as the gunner fired again and again.

"They're slowed up," yelled the sergeant. "Cross while you can. Pull out the bridge. Nash and I'll hold them a few more minutes."

Hume and Alec wheeled their mounts, and dashed for the heaving knot of bison on the plains. The cannonading had thrown panic into the buffalo. The herd had divided to avoid the pile of dead. Through the lane thus formed, Nash and the sergeant went shouting and firing into its flanks. It was daring death to thread that crazy, milling herd. It seemed like throwing man and horse to a thousand goring horns. But minutes counted for lives at the bridge behind them, so the two men fought to hold the charging horde till the poplar logs could be jerked out.

Shoulders to the wheels, to aid the horses, the Mounted were lashing the last wagons across. They shouted to Hume and Nash as they loosed their tugs and took a hitch around the bridge timbers. But another shout arose in the lane through the herd, and along the frenzied ranks of the bison Sioux and *metis* tore down on the pair of whites. Like demons they rode, in one lightning rush striving to undo the desperate work of Nash and Hume, and crowd the buffalo onto the bridge the Mounted were pulling out.

Jean Bruxelles, swiftest rider of the mob, was rearing in front, all covered with blood and sweat. His pinto had gone down to the gunner's first shot. The plains had dusted him gray from *metis* cap to moccasin, but he had leaped to the back of another runaway piebald, to cut off his old enemies. The shrieking, shooting horde on his heels changed the fickle mind of the bison. They surged against Night Hawk and Plains Burner, rolling them back, bellowing thunderously.

"Time we crossed, eh, Sergeant?" panted Alec, swerving Plains Burner this way and that from the thrusting horns.

Hume, too, was baffling momentarily swift charges, maneuvering Night Hawk, who backed and wheeled to the sergeant's word.

"Wait a second," he said tersely. "Bruxelles is through."

In his rash eagerness Jean had distanced his companions. He flashed through the last few rods of the open lane, and cleared the piled dead in a spectacular jump that landed him beside Nash and Hume.

"Come on, *camarades!*" he shouted triumphantly.

There was no response. Jean looked back, to see the open lane closed. The surging ranks crowded together again. Cut off abruptly from his friends, he wheeled, to find Nash and Hume riding at him from either side. The hunter had become the hunted. There was no escape right, left, or behind. The only open pathway was in front, where Raoul Belcourt and the Mounted had succeeded in dragging out most of the bridge logs.

Louise was hanging in anxiety on the work.

"Come on!" she cried shrilly to Nash and Hume. "There are only three logs left."

Bruxelles darted one glance at the narrow crossing. Nash and Hume were right on top of him. He ducked under the arms that reached to pluck him from his horse, backed between Night Hawk and Plains Burner, and raced for the three-log bridge.

Jean's sudden dash took Raoul and the Mounted by surprise. His Indian pony, sure-footed as a cat, darted across. Plains Burner and Night Hawk galloped after him, zig-zagging through the jumbled wagon train as they bounded over the poplar island. There was no handy dead trunk on the farther side of the island. Bruxelles, however, had method in his mad dash. There remained the desperate chance of small tussocks in the quicksands. He might be able to jump his horse from mound to mound, and reach the solid open plain once more.

"Pull up, Jean," commanded Hume harshly as they sped along. "There's no footing. You can't get off."

Bruxelles never slackened. Three jumps ahead of Plains Burner and Night Hawk, he skirted the western shore of the island. There the turf presented an even surface. It looked solid, but Jean felt his Indian pony shy instinctively from it. With a wild yell he gave the piebald its head in a dash to the eastern shore.

His swerve afforded Nash and Hume a chance to wheel short as they followed. The action cut Jean's lead.

Only a length behind him now, Nash and Hume crowded him right to the edge of the poplar mound. The piebald could not shy. Night Hawk loomed on one flank, Plains Burner on the other.

Jean's fierce, bloodshot eyes looked back once, then they focused on a tussock twenty feet out from the shore. Other tussocks, scattered about like green, velvet foot-rests, dotted the flat. Jean's glance followed the treacherous line.

The sergeant saw that he meant to jump for it. Nash, too, realized Jean's intention. Both men seized him round the neck. But Jean's whip came down with a vicious smack on his pony's ribs. The piebald, raw-hided on, head lifted into air, launched into the forced leap.

Nash and Hume had no time to loosen their arm-grips on Jean's neck. They were locked with him in the take-off. The throw-back movement of their bodies signaled Plains Burner and Night Hawk far too close to the island's edge. Both horses could do nothing but gather themselves and take off with the piebald.

The tussock was large enough to support the weight of a single horse, but it could not bear the weight of three. Twelve sharp hoofs cut it to pieces with the shock of landing. Night Hawk, Plains Burner, and the piebald stuck fast in the quicksand underneath. To riders gifted with western plainscraft, there was but one thing to do in their disaster. Half involuntarily Nash voiced it aloud.

"Throw yourselves flat!" he cried.

He pitched face downward from Plains Burner's back to the sands. Sergeant Hume did likewise, but he did not relinquish his prisoner. His neck-grip on Bruxelles pulled the *metis'* leader with him. Together the three floundered in the ooze. Nash and Hume strove with a swimming motion to keep on top and reach the poplar island. Jean grappled crazily with them, pulling the opposite way. If he could reach the piebald's back, he could leap from it to another tussock and chance his desperate way out afoot.

Plains Burner, Night Hawk and the

piebald, all three western trained, remained stock-still where their legs sank. Without a plunge, or heave they lay slack-muscled. They had been trapped in quicksand more than once before. Their peculiar equine wisdom told them that their own salvation rested on the salvation of their masters.

However, instead of the swimming motion extricating Nash and Hume, the conflict of movement in fighting Bruxelles was sinking them deeper and deeper. Mounted men would rush to their aid as soon as the bridge was out, but, his chin on the sand-streaked slime, Nash looked in vain for a flash of the red coats on the island margin. No scarlet uniform yet—but yonder was a horse darting through the trees!

Alec raised himself a little higher, as a trickle of alkali water ran into his mouth. Staring, he saw Louise galloping down with one of the stout wagon ropes in her hands.

Louise had followed the chase from the first, but the terrific pace had left her many lengths behind. Still, her keen ears interpreted every sound, and the splash and commotion in the bog told her what had happened. Riding furiously, she dashed along the island's edge. She swung the rope overhead, and cast it fair into Nash's face. Alec desisted in his swimming motion. Using both hands, he looped it about his own shoulders, and those of Hume.

"Hang onto Bruxelles!" he warned the sergeant.

Louise had passed her end of the rope around a poplar trunk. She fastened the loose strands with a triple cinch of rawhide about her horse. At her command the pony threw his weight on the rope. Riding at an angle, she pulled as with block and tackle. First the men's shoulders appeared, then their waists. She could hear the feet of the Mounted plunging through the poplar. She set her pony anew to the strain as her father and the redcoats broke through the trees.

"Save the horses—Night Hawk and Plains Burner, anyway!" she cried. "I'll never stand to see Plains Burner drown!"

Luckily Raoul Belcourt and the rest bore in their hands the last slim young poplar they had pulled out of the bridge. With a run the Mounted thrust its butt into the mire toward the horses. Firmly the redcoat group held it by the tip, while Raoul scrambled down the trunk to the bogged animals.

The struggles of Jean Bruxelles had started the piebald kicking. The Indian pony was hopelessly down, with water rippling over its back. Raoul knew there was no use bothering him. He seized the reins of Night Hawk and Plains Burner, and lifted their heads as he urged them forward. Gamely they responded, half-plunging, half-swimming, till Belcourt got their forefeet resting on the poplar trunk.

The scarlet coats clothed mighty muscles. At their powerful jerk, Raoul's tree-trunk slid into shallower muck. The teams were also on the run down to help as fast as the men could unhitch from the wagons. With military precision the gunner who had raked the herd wheeled the swiftest pair of bays at the water's edge, and hooked them to the poplar tip. A whip cracked. Raoul, poplar, horses and all, were jerked suddenly ashore.

Louise, too, had reached the limit of her pull. Sheer out of the sands of death she plucked the three men at the end of her rope. Hume arose, dripping, with his prisoner.

"The Mounted sure owes you one, Mademoiselle Louise," he lauded.

"Speaking impersonally, eh, Louise?" laughed Nash. "I'm not going to tell you how I feel, personally—yet. I hope Plains Burner doesn't either."

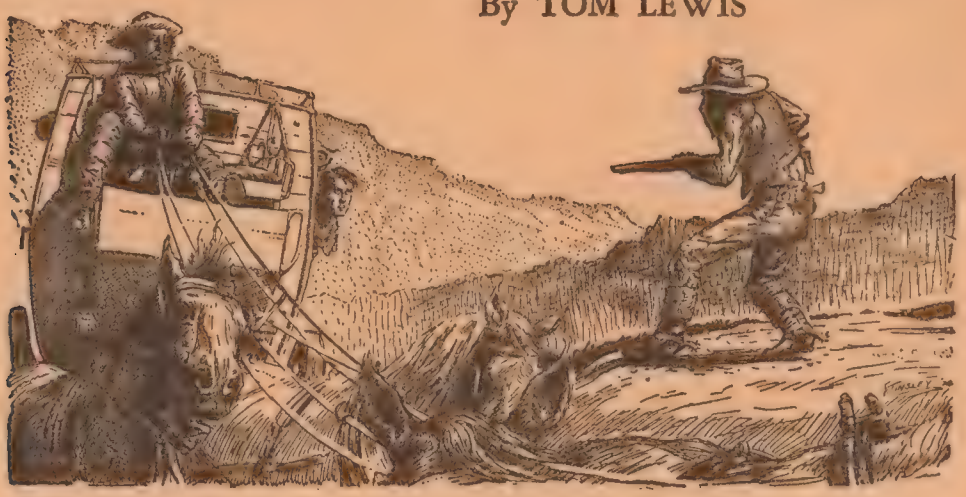
"The splendid rascal hasn't a word to say!" cried Louise. "Except that if you try to drown him again he's going to come back to me."

"Maybe he will come back to you some of these days," ventured Nash significantly, as together they led the way back to the poplar island camp. "But it's the first and last time for such a close shave."

From their water-bordered, quicksand-guarded refuge he pointed a hand at two endless moving walls of angered bison, bound on an all-day passage, savage prison walls of flesh which barred *metis* and Sioux away, and held Jean Bruxelles in custody.

Jesse James–Saddle Privateer

By TOM LEWIS



At sixteen he hit the saddle with Bloody Charlie Quantrill. At twenty he headed a flying squadron. For almost a score of years he galloped a lead-hewn trail only to be killed at home.

JESSE WOODSON JAMES, a pale, slender boy of fifteen, looked up apprehensively.

He had been plowing, out there in a field near his home in Clay County, Missouri. For three hours he had followed an old bull-tongue plow, down one row and up another. But it was a hot day in June. So the plowboy stopped to wipe his face and rest his horses.

Then, following his custom, he glanced toward the farmhouse. The time was 1863. The Border States were full of war and rumors of war. Frank, Jesse's brother, was in the saddle with Quantrill. Threats had been muttered against Jesse's stepfather, Dr. Reuben Samuel. Union raiders were abroad in Missouri.

And now, what was that? Jesse thought he heard a shrill cry—his mother's voice. He waited. It was repeated; a broken, agonized scream.

Jesse James wrapped the lines around the handles of the plow. Then he started running toward the homestead. Fear shook him. What had happened to his stepfather? What was going to happen to Jesse's mother?

He reached the orchard. He was panting. His blue eyes were twitching nervously. Then he saw it.

Doctor Samuel, with a rope knotted around his neck, was in the hands of his enemies. Twenty-six Federal soldiers, under command of a bearded officer, were hustling him toward a tree. Mrs. Samuel screamed:

"Don't hang my husband. Don't! He's done nothing to you. Jesse, my son, my son!"

Jesse darted toward the house. In the bedroom he had occupied with Frank, there was a gun. But the bearded captain snarled:

"Stay where you are, young feller. If you try to get a gun, we'll give you what we mean to give him."

Jesse pleaded: "But what's pa done—what have any of us done?"

"Quantrill!" said the officer. "He's been too thick with Quantrill. So has Frank. He's with that cutthroat now. We've come to teach you people a lesson. You're too disloyal. Now, go ahead, boys."

They tossed the rope over a limb. Men began pulling. When Dr. Samuel's

feet were clear of the ground the soldiers snubbed the free end of the rope around the trunk of the tree. Then, leaving their victim to strangle, they started toward their horses.

But Jesse's blue eyes were blazing. He jerked a knife from his pocket and began slashing the rope.

The officer's face flamed. "Grab him!" he roared. "He's too young to hang, but take him down the road. Then I'll tell you what to do with him."

NEAR the plow they halted. Then they stripped the boy's blue checkered shirt from his back.

"Now," said the captain, "take those rope lines and teach this young guerrilla a lesson. Give him ten lashes for me."

Here a lieutenant added: "Yes, and one for every man in our command. That's the way we handle Quantrill's black band."

"Smack!" The rope was doubled, the blows fell heavily, splitting and bruising the white flesh. Jesse's blood dripped on the freshly turned soil. He stood the torture as well as any fifteen-year-old boy; but when it was over, he whimpered and then fell in one of the rows he had turned with the bull-tongue plow.

And here his mother found him.

"Come, son," she said, and took him in her arms. "They think your pa's dead, but he isn't. I cut him down with your knife, here. His throat's terrible bad, but I hope he's going to be all right. But your back! Oh, my poor, poor boy!"

But Jesse wasn't thinking now of his back. "Give me that knife, ma!" he demanded grimly. "And I want the gun in Frank's room. Tomorrow I'm going to join up with Quantrill!"

WILLIAM CLARKE QUANTRILL —commonly called Bloody Charlie Quantrill—was talking with three of his lieutenants.

These subordinates, Bill Anderson, Fletch Taylor and George Shepherd, were completing plans for another wild ride with the guerrilla chieftain of the Border States.

"Tonight," said Quantrill, "we wipe out a Federal camp and borrow some horses. I'm sick of seeing my soldiers on plow horses. Is this one of them now?"

JESSE JAMES

Jesse James, an unpretentious figure in jeans pants and blue-figured shirt, rode up and dismounted.

"I'm Frank James' brother," he announced simply, "and I've come to ride under Charlie Quantrill. Is he here?"

The guerrilla chieftain made a sign to Bill Anderson. Then Quantrill replied:

"No, son, Quantrill's not here. I heard he was captured by the Federals and they strung him up to a sour-apple tree. But he wouldn't take you, anyway. You're too young."

Jesse's thin lips curled. "I can shoot straighter than Frank," he asserted, "and I can ride as good as Quantrill himself. Look!"

He kicked his horse into action, gripped the lines in his teeth, then rode past a slender tree at top speed. He repeated this. And each time, as he swirled past the tree, he threw a slug from Frank's rifle.

"See," he said to Quantrill, "I hit that tree every time. That's the way Qantrill rides. But give me a pair of revolvers. Then I'll show you how to shoot with both hands."

Bill Anderson handed him his Colt .44's. "Hit the tree five out of ten, on the run, and I'll speak to Quantrill about you," he said with a grin. "Think you can manage to do it?"

Jesse's eyes narrowed "If I miss it once out of ten I never want to ride with Quantrill," he announced curtly, and went lurching toward the tree. Then he came swooping back toward them, a gun in each

hand, and Bang! Bang! Bang! Every slug went home!

"That," said Quantrill, "was pretty fair shooting, but I still think you're too young. You go on back home and protect your ma. Then maybe, if Quantrill's fightin' next summer, he'll send for you."

But as Jesse's face clouded, Bill Anderson called him aside. He whispered:

"Don't worry, kid. I'm Quantrill's right-hand man, and I hope I know shootin' when I see it. Tonight I'm sending Fletch Taylor out with some men. You hang around and go with him. If you make good, I'll take you in my command. And, though I guess you don't know it, that's some honor."

So Jesse James joined Quantrill. And before he was sixteen, Bill Anderson said of him:

"What do I think of Jesse James? I think he's the best shot in my command. And I know he's the best fighter."

JESSE JAMES, with ghastly wounds on his slim body, proved to Quantrill that a beardless boy was a better man than many of his seasoned fighters. For more than a year he rode and fought like a demon. Numerous men died at his hands.

One evening Quantrill halted him. "Jesse," he asked earnestly, "where did you learn to shoot?"

Jesse, who had a cynical touch, replied: "Oh, my people came from Kentucky, you know. They raise 'em on whisky and bullets down there. And when you get a 'rep' it sticks to you for life."

This proved true in the case of Jesse James. When he left Quantrill, which he did in 1864, he had killed so many men of Missouri that he didn't even dare go home to recover from his wounds. Instead, he went to Texas.

"I knew they would kill me," he explained to George Shepherd, "and I decided to wait till things cooled off before I offered to surrender. And I'll make you a bet. When I finally go back to Missouri, someone will get me."

He grew bitter as letters arrived from Missouri. His mother and her small daughter, Susie, had been in jail in St. Joseph. His stepfather had been ill-treated by Federal soldiers and other raiders.

Frank, now in Kentucky with Quantrill, received a letter from Jesse. Jesse wrote: "They say every hand is against us at home, but I can't believe it. Anyway, I'm going back as soon as I get well. You meet me. If they run us away from home, we can go to that cave. You know."

This cave, referred to only once in Jesse's correspondence, was the famous "Land of Nowhere." It kept the enemies of the James boys puzzled for years. Pinkerton detectives searched for it for fifteen years. They never found it.

At last, Jesse came home. And, as he had predicted, he was "jumped" as soon as he set foot in Clay County. A Federal soldier, reputed to be from Wisconsin, shot him in the breast.

The bullet made an ugly, jagged wound, and for a long time it seemed that Jesse Woodson James would never live to be twenty. He suffered intensely from lung infection.

But Frank, bitter against Federal soldiers in particular and Border partisans in general, spirited Jesse away from the Samuel home. He, with an old negro named Lem, got a spring wagon. They bedded it with straw. Then they moved Jesse. Frank took him to the cave that was hereafter to be the only home of the James boys for nearly fourteen years.

Jesse recovered, but it was slow work, and then the aftermath of the Civil War hit Missouri and the Border States. Little bands of guerrillas were still operating throughout the country.

"Jesse, they say we're at the head of all this stealing," Frank said one night, "and I guess that'll stick for the rest of our lives. What're we going to do about it?"

Jesse thought this over. At last he said: "I'll tell you, Frank. We'll rob a bank and then get out of the country. It's just like I told Quantrill about being born in a certain place. I said, 'Whisky and bullets are supposed to go together.' They'll never rest till they hang us or shoot us. For myself, I'm for giving them something to kill us for. Are you with me?"

The James brothers shook hands. And there, in the Robber Cave, was launched the nucleus of a mysterious band which was to scourge the frontier and make bank robbery and train banditry a household word all over America.

"OPEN that safe—and be quick about it! Hurry, I tell you, or I'll blow the top of your head off!"

The place was Liberty, Mo., the date was February 14, 1866, and the hour was early morning. America's first daylight bank robbery!

Twelve men, armed like Quantrill's guerrillas and grim as death, stood guard around the Commercial Bank. They came quietly, materializing from nowhere, but they knew what they wanted and precisely how to get it.

Cashier Bird opened the vault, the robbers opened a wheat sack, and in less than ten minutes more than $70,000 had been transferred from legitimate channels to the Border Bandits. Then the bandits rode away.

But they rode in a hail of lead, and as they rode they gave the blood-curdling Quantrill yell, and they accompanied this with a raking revolver fire. One citizen of Liberty fell, mortally wounded, and others received minor injuries.

But who headed this band? Was it Jesse James? Frank James? Cole Younger?

All denied it.

"How could I do it?" Jesse James demanded. "I was in bed with two big holes in my lungs!"

Frank James insisted: "I was in Kentucky."

And Cole Younger repeated over and over: "I had nothing to do with it."

But, regardless of denials, the leader of this party was a man who could not resist his little joke. The cashier's name being Bird, the robber said: "Don't you know that all birds should be caged?" Whereupon, he locked the cashier in the looted vault.

Jesse James, it was recalled, was very fond of his little joke now and then. And he was no stranger to alibis. He often wrote long, serious letters to newspapers. In these, he branded the charges against him and set up a most plausible alibi for all his actions.

Thus, in Missouri, grew the alibi, the daylight bank robbery, and a rugged sense of humor. And other banks were slated for robbery.

Whereupon, the Pinkertons entered Missouri. And Jesse James, whether guilty or innocent, became a hunted man.

IT was noon. The month was October, the year 1866. Five horsemen rode into Lexington, Mo., and dismounted near the bank of Alexander-Mitchell & Company.

Cashier J. L. Thomas glanced up as the form of a man darkened the door. He was followed by another.

"Change this?" the first inquired. He was pleasant enough. "It's a fifty."

"Certainly," said Thomas. "How'll you have it?"

"Any way you like, just so there's plenty of it," said the other. "But take a look at these, so you'll make no mistake."

The cashier shivered. He knew Colt .44's—and there were four of them. "W-what is it, gentlemen?" he quavered. "I—I'm all alone. The others have gone to dinner."

The bandit leader laughed. "You won't need any dinner unless we can fill this wheat sack with money," he reminded Thomas. "Now, step lively, so we can get along. We've an engagement with the Pinkertons. It'll never do to disappoint them. They never forget."

Cashier Thomas placed a little over $2,000 in the sack. "I'm sorry it's not more," he explained, "but there isn't another penny."

"You'd better be glad it's not less," the leader growled, "but it's enough to buy a little feed for the stock. Times are hard, you know, but they'll be better for the undertaker if you give an alarm before we get out of here."

Noon again, and still in Missouri, but this time in the little city of Savannah. And, again, five horsemen—good horses, good riders, and a good empty wheat sack. But ill luck!

Judge McLain, proprietor of the bank, was not to be taken unawares as had his fellow bankers of Liberty and Lexington. He banged the safe shut and began shooting.

McLain's first bullet missed, the second caught a robber in the arm, and then the bandits began throwing lead at him. McLain went down, lead spattering all around him, a .44 pellet in his chest.

His son raced out and spread the alarm. Soon Savannah's one business street was alive with men. And the men had guns. A few had horses. These chased the bandits until they were outdistanced.

EMBITTERED by this failure, the robbers next centered their efforts on Richmond. This is fifteen miles from Lexington.

Again noon, again the terrifying rebel yell, and again a dozen bandits on clean-limbed horses. They say Jesse James always bought his horses. There can be little doubt as to one point: he certainly knew how to pick them. Not many men could outride this king-bee of the Missouri banditti.

"Get the money, put it in this sack, and be quick about it!" This was the sharp order given by the leader in the banking house of Hughes and Mason. "And no funny work with a Colt. We'll break all the colts in this neighborhood." The cashier crammed the money into the wheat sack. It was something over $4,000.

Then Mayor Shaw ran out and threw down on the leader with an ugly-looking six-shooter which had come West with the Union troops. His intentions were the best, but his aim was bad, and in a moment he was grovelling in the street. The leader dropped him with a ball from one of his .44's. Then three other bullets found the Mayor and he was still.

Now the bandits rode hard for the jail. Here several of their friends were imprisoned. Jailer Griffin and his son realized what was about to happen. They seized sixguns and began firing. One robber was unseated. Then the jailer fell, riddled, and his son, a mere boy, dropped a moment later.

Here the firing became general, the chief gave a sharp order and the bandits, still yelling savagely, galloped out of town with their loot, but without their imprisoned friends.

Accusations and denials flew thick and fast. Jesse James presented an amiable alibi. Cole Younger said he was in Texas. But the Pinkertons seemed weary of alibis. They closed in on Frank and Jesse James. But all they found was some fine horses. The boys themselves were out of the state.

RUSSELLVILLE, Kentucky, six bandits and the inevitable wheat sack. The bank of Norton and Long. Casually, two men entered.

"Can you change this, please?" Then, in the same matter-of-fact tone: "It's a fifty."

The cashier thought the bill was counterfeit. "Feels queer," he said, "but I can't be sure."

"You can be sure of death if you don't do as I say," said the stranger, leveling a revolver and shaking out the Missouri wheat sack. "We want about $20,000 from you."

The cashier wasn't disposed to give it. Instead, he turned, ran, and drew bandit bullets. Outside, guns were cracking. A Kentucky citizen named Owens had opened up on the guard near the door.

But the bandits inside worked methodically. They scooped $14,000 into the wheat sack. This was all they could find. So they went outside and pumped lead at the belligerent Kentuckians. They rode out of Russellville, yelling defiantly, and leaving three injured in the dust of the road.

After this robbery, the scene shifted rapidly. Pinkertons, hot on the scent, reported Jesse James here, there and everywhere. He was robbing banks and holding up trains all over the country. So said the detectives.

But Jesse said otherwise. His alibis set forth that he was in California, in Louisiana, in Texas, and in Indian Territory. But there was one place he never mentioned in his alibis.

This was Tennessee. Here, when he wasn't hiding out with Frank and the Younger brothers in their secluded cave, Jesse James was living, very quietly, as John D. Howard. He lived elsewhere, too; but invariably he came back to Clay County, Missouri. Here he was born; and here he hoped to die—with his boots on.

MURDER accompanied the next robbery. The scene was the Davies County Bank, Gallatin, Mo. The time, as usual, was daylight. The same grain sack!

Three men rode in. One covered Captain J. W. Sheets. Another gobbled up the money, $1,000. The third, standing outside, held a rifle ready for emergencies.

All went off quietly inside the little bank. Captain Sheets, unarmed, offered no resistance. But suddenly the leader of the bandits threw down on Captain Sheets and killed him.

No reason was given the banker. But to a man they met on the highway, one robber explained: "I've just killed a man in the bank—a fellow named Cox. He killed my brother. If anybody asks, my name's Anderson."

Plausible, the detectives insisted, but wholly untrue. They claimed the killer was Jesse James. Furthermore, they pointed out, Jesse knew the man was Sheets, not Cox, and he murdered him out of pure deviltry. But Jesse, in his alibi, ridiculed this version.

Now the flying squadron shifted to Corydon, Iowa. Seven men, superbly mounted, cantered into town while a political spellbinder was holding the populace in courthouse square.

"Hands up!" The cashier was alone, there were no stray customers, and the robbery was easy. The bandit leader, joking, as usual, tied the bank official and took $40,000. Then they rode down to the courthouse. Here, they interrupted the speaker to inform him that the bank had been robbed.

"Ho, ho!" said the spellbinder, "that's funny—and we can all laugh. And, now that we've laughed, let's proceed with the address. We have no fear of bank robbers in Iowa. They belong in the old Robber State of Missouri."

There was a general guffaw. And the robbers rode out unmolested.

ROBBERIES and killings continued. The flying squadron, three, five, or seven men rode hundreds of miles on tireless horses. But always they came back to Clay County, Missouri. And always the trail ended near the Blue River.

Cashier R. C. Martin, alone in a little bank in Columbia, Kentucky, had the temerity to refuse when the robbers insisted that he fill the traveling wheat sack. They killed him and dashed away. But they got only a few stacks of currency. This haul netted less than $1,000.

But Kansas City, Mo., was more profitable and somewhat more spectacular, if less deadly. The annual fair was on, scores of horsemen were on the highways; and the attendance was excellent.

At the fair grounds, there was a metal box and $10,000. The robber chieftain, always a close observer of stock exhibits, knew about this money and wanted it.

Suddenly, three horsemen came careening in, the crowd split wildly, there were a few rapid shots from big caliber guns, and the metal box had been swept into the waiting wheat sack. Then the bandits were off in a swirl of dust. The last thing the fair grounds visitors heard was the shrill Quantrill yell.

More hard riding, a minor hold-up here and there, and then the bandits swooped down on St. Genevieve, Mo., where they had every reason to believe they would clean up $50,000.

Instead, they left this quaint little town in disgust, for they got less than $5,000. And now their thoughts turned to train robbery.

Whether Jesse James originated train robbery is a moot question, but the Pinkertons claimed they saw every evidence of his handiwork in the hold-up of the C. R. & P., passenger train near Adair, Iowa.

Seven grim riders, a pile of cross-ties, a ruby signal and a sudden skirling of brakes. The express slowed down, the bandits clambered aboard, and in a moment all was excitement and babbling of tongues.

"There's $75,000 in gold on board," the robber leader roared, "and we want every cent of it."

"You're mistaken," said the express messenger, "and I'm sure of that. You'll find less than $5,000."

This proved true. The thieves had been given a false tip. There was a train with a big gold shipment; but this wasn't it. So the horsemen left, firing their big revolvers and cursing.

Next, they went to Hot Springs, Ark., held up a stagecoach and robbed a couple of minor banks. Then, another train robbery, this time on the Iron Mountain line. Five riders had a hand in this, the Gadshill robbery, and $5,000 was the extent of the haul.

HERE a question arises: But, were there no arrests during all these spectacular events?

Yes, of course; and a number of hot battles among the robbers themselves. But Jesse James was never arrested. He carried his weapons, every hour of the day, and when he slept those deadly six-guns were ever beside him.

Yet, Jesse James wanted to "retire." He kept talking of it to Frank. "Every time we make a haul," he complained, "we have to give away so much that we have little left." It was agreed that when they got their "pile" they would quit.

But when Jesse's ministerial friend, an intimate of his father, reproached him, and wanted to know why he didn't get out of such nefarious business, Jesse said:

"Get out? How can I? Every hand is against me. I dare not sleep without my guns."

"Then," said the minister, "you'd better turn to the Lord. Jesse, do you ever read the Bible?"

Jesse amazed him by displaying a thumb-marked Bible. "I read whenever I dare show a light."

He expressed a hope that the old minister would pray for him. He insisted: "We were forced into this, you know; they wouldn't let us live right. But we had to live, some way."

The minister said he found this hard to believe. But Jesse tried to persuade him; and finally rode off, shaking his head and quoting Scripture.

PINKERTON spies, closing in on the gang, encountered two of the Younger boys and halted them. There was an argument, then fast shooting, and when the battle ended John Younger was dead and two detectives died.

Then, abruptly, two Pinkerton operatives appeared in the guise of farmhands. A man calling himself John W. Witcher started for the Samuel home seeking work. He met sudden death, by a bullet, and there were persistent reports that he had been tortured to make him confess the whereabouts of other Pinkerton detectives.

The other operative, John Ladd, served as a farmhand at the home of Dan Askew. Askew was a neighbor of the James boys. Ladd disappeared, after reporting that the boys were at the home of their mother, but they seldom remained at their old home, preferring the cave. This they had fitted up with all necessary equipment.

In any case, John Ladd's report to the contrary, they were away from home when detectives, said to represent Pinkerton, called at the Samuel farm at night.

These night prowlers, hoping to smoke Jesse out, threw fireballs—cotton soaked in oil and turpentine—into the living-room. Doctor Samuel and his wife leaped out of bed and tried to save their home.

Then someone hurled a grenade and, as the bomb exploded, the attackers fled. One dropped a revolver bearing the initials, "P. G. G." This meant, according to Jesse James, "Pinkerton's Government Guard."

This bombshell tore off Mrs. Samuel's right arm. It also caused the death of her son, Archie; he was eight years old and the half-brother of Jesse James.

No one was punished for this crime. But Jesse James never forgot the outrage. After this he was merciless. It wasn't long before Farmer Dan Askew was shot and killed. Neighbors recalled that it was Askew who had employed John Ladd. And Jesse James figured it was Ladd who gave the information to the Pinkertons.

JESSE JAMES covered a wide territory after this. He ranged from Missouri to far-distant points, including Minnesota, on the north, and Mexico in the south.

Robberies, with attendant injuries and death, were frequent. San Antonio, Texas, reported a $5,000 stage robbery. Here the humorous bandit exchanged banter with a Bishop. Huntington, W. Va., turned in a $10,000 bank job.

"The James boys!" said the detectives. "These jobs have all their earmarks." Easily said, but hard to prove. The James boys rode hard, they ranged far, and with one exception there wasn't a photograph of them to be had. Their only picture, a tintype made near Paso Robles, Cal., was in a little locket. And this locket nestled close to their mother's breast.

Now there came reports of bad blood between Jesse James and Cole Younger. Just what caused the rift has never been fathomed.

Cole, a hard man and a grim fighter, invited Jesse out in the road. Jesse and Frank were behind a tree.

"Step out," Cole Younger invited, "and we'll finish this with pistols or shotguns. I don't mean you, Frank. I mean your brother."

This, so far as known, is the only time —with one memorable exception—that Jesse backed down. The other occasion

was in Abilene. He had gone there on "business" but that old tall marshal, with the long hair, the keen eyes, and the notches on his guns, looked him over calmly—and Jesse left Abilene empty-handed. But he wanted to shoot it out.

And, in this instance, too, he expressed a willingness to shoot it out with Younger; but Frank objected.

"We've enough to do," said the senior member of the bandit fraternity, "without wanting to kill one another. Now, you boys patch things up." And they did. This time Jesse backed down on his brother's advice.

So the gang stuck together. Robberies piled up. Sometimes there were three men; again, there were five; and, still again, seven or eight.

But the method was always the same. Fast horses, heavy guns, hoarse commands, the wheat sack and the getaway. Five thousand dollars here; ten thousand, or less, there.

Six men took $25,000 from a Kansas Pacific train at Muncie, Kansas. Eight robbers got $20,000 from a Missouri Pacific limited at Otterville, Mo. At Ogallala, Nebraska, seven bandits scooped $15,000 from a Union Pacific mail train.

These depredations continued in the face of $50,000 reward, and in spite of desperate efforts by the Pinkertons. The James boys and the Younger brothers were still at large.

RECKONING was at hand, however, as far as the Youngers were concerned. Jesse, planning to go far afield, headed his little band toward Minnesota.

At Northfield they attempted to hold up and rob the First National Bank. This proved a ghastly mistake.

Soon guns were cracking, lead was hissing in the streets, and in an incredibly short time two of Jesse's riders were dead. They were Bud Stiles and Clell Miller. And a bank executive lay mortally wounded.

In the street, Jesse raced for his horse, shooting as he ran. The Youngers mounted with shotgun slugs thudding all around them. They sped out of Northfield, Frank James bringing up the rear, shooting over his shoulder and yelling defiance at their pursuers.

But these aroused Minnesotans were not to be frightened by rebel yells. Posses speedily fell in behind the bandits. Determined citizens, with shotguns and rifles, chased Jesse James as he never before had been chased.

They trailed them, in rain and through swamps, until they separated. Why they separated remains a mystery. One version, which has endured, is that one of the Youngers was leaving a blood-trail. Jesse James, so the version runs, wanted to shoot him. Cole Younger indignantly refused.

In any case, Frank and Jesse James took one route; the Youngers took another. And, in the end, the James brothers escaped, after a bitter chase, and made it safely home to their cave.

But the three Youngers—Cole, Jim, and Bob—were cornered, shot down, and captured by the possemen. Bob had wounds in the breast, Jim had collected five bullets and a broken jaw, and Cole was bleeding from a dozen wounds in the head and body. But all steadfastly refused to name their companions.

The men were indicted, charged with the murder of Cashier Heywood and Nick Gustavson, and finally pleaded guilty. This plea saved their lives, since Minnesota had a statute protecting murderers who pleaded guilty. Thus the men drew life imprisonment at Stillwater. And here Bob Younger died.

JESSE JAMES, a man of many names and numerous disguises, was living quietly in St. Joseph, Mo., when Governor Crittenden decided that Missouri could never lift her head as long as this noted bandit lived.

Jesse, known here as Tom Howard, was married and had children attending school in St. Joseph.

Yet, despite the quarter million loot he is reputed to have gathered during fifteen years of banditry, he was virtually broke. With less than $1,000 to his name he was planning a new robbery.

And here, for the first time, Jesse James made a tactical blunder. He took into his confidence two young men known as the Johnsons. They were, as a matter of fact, Bob and Charley Ford. And they had already conspired with Missouri officials to assassinate Jesse James.

Yet Jesse trusted them implicitly. He

even gave Bob Ford a new revolver. He said, in presenting this:

"Take good care of her, Bob. She's a daisy. Never missed on me yet."

Jesse, planning to rob the Platte City bank, wrote letters to Lincoln inquiring about land. It was the belief of his intimates that he meant to use the money to buy a farm near Lincoln, Nebraska, and there settle down as Tom Howard and raise his family in peace.

But this was not to be.

A few short weeks after he had revealed his plans for robbing the Platte City bank, two men appeared at the State Capitol building, and requested that they be announced to the governor. Officials surrounding the governor's person at first refused to admit the two roughly dressed men, but upon their insistence that the governor would want to see them, they were finally announced, and much to the surprise of the executive staff, were admitted instantly. The two were Bob and Charley Ford. They told the governor of their friendship with James, and of James' plan to rob the Platte City bank. When they left the executive office an hour later, they were smiling in anticipation of the fat reward that they were sure would be theirs.

It was April 3, 1882. Jesse James, a tall man, with dark hair and a full beard, decided to dust off the picture of his favorite horse, "Skyrocket."

However, he made a second mistake just here. It was a warm day, as he had remarked; so he took off his coat, then unstrapped his heavy, brass-handled revolvers, and laid them on the bed.

Bob and Charley Ford were in that room. The moment the outlaw mounted a chair, unarmed and presenting his back to them, the Fords went into action.

Quick as a panther Charley Ford whipped out a gun—the revolver Jesse James had given him—and sent a slug into the bandit's head.

Jesse James, warned by some mysterious sense, had tried to turn. Perhaps he heard the slight movement as the gun was being drawn from its holster. Who can say.

But this man, who was so fast with his own guns, had no chance. The large ball, fired from a .45 Colt, ripped through the base of the skull and split the brain-cells of the famous bandit.

He tried to speak, as his wife ran to him, but no words came and he died in her arms. And, as he expired, his little dog slipped in, wagging its tail, while the children of the outlaw tugged at their mother's dress and wept.

Jesse's wife, denouncing the assassin, cried: "You murdered him for the money, you miserable traitor. May the curse of God fall on both of you."

Later, Jesse's mother put a curse on both the Fords. And young Jesse James, when he was ten years old, told his grandmother he intended killing both of the weazel-eyed traitors.

But, as it turned out, this wasn't necessary. Charley Ford blew out his own brains. And Bob Ford was shotgunned to death by Red Kelley in Creede, Colorado. The charge blew his collar-button through his neck. "Soapy" Smith, who thought this might bring him luck in gambling, picked it up and carried it to Alaska. But "Soapy" was killed by an officer of the law, and whatever luck the collar-button might have was forever lost; for it was buried with Smith in a lonely grave in Alaska.

THIS, briefly, was the checkered career of Jesse James. On his grave, in Missouri, we find an inscription. It was placed there by his mother. It reads:

"In loving remembrance of my beloved son, Jesse W. James; died, April 3, 1882; aged, 34 years, 6 months, 28 days; murdered by a traitor and coward whose name is not worthy to appear here."

Frank James, surrendering, stood trial on several counts and was acquitted. He lived honorably thereafter, and died in his mother's home—with his boots off.

This ended the reign of the border scourge.

LONG RIFLES BLAZE THE OVERLAND TRAIL

By CAPT. WINFIELD CARTER

Piutes and Sioux, white renegades, a thousand perils marked the Sangre de Cristo—still Tom Marcy, tenderfoot, pushed on, for some place in that half-known wilderness he aimed to tribe with Death.

Novelet of Buckskin and Long Rifles

EIGHT days and eight nights the covered wagon train had stood off that war party of blood-daubed, shrieking Utes, but it couldn't last much longer. Gradually the grim defenders were weakening. Shortly those red and vermilion-slashed savages would break through—and there was no such thing as Indian mercy.

Tom Marcy, nursing the cold stock of his long Hall rifle, stared grimly into the night. He felt the great loneliness of the prairie, the utter hopelessness of succor way off in the midst of this endless plain.

For this was the Overland Trail in the

days before there was any such thing as a trail, when the great white-topped wagons from Ohio and Illinois and Kentucky lumbered westward like ships steering by the stars and the sun.

Lying there on his belly, long rifle propped across a sack, Tom Marcy probed the darkness. He had a feeling that another attack was due. He could see the white faces of the women and the children sitting in the bright darkness in the middle of the camp and he prayed that the Lord would save them.

Jed Bent, a fellow Ohioan, came over and leaned against a wagon. "Hear anythin', yet?"

"Nothing except the moanin' of the cattle. But if I was you I'd keep down."

"Oh, they can't get me," laughed Jed.

There was a twang. Something keened the air and struck with a soft thuck. Jed Bent screamed. Tom saw the blood leap around the shaft buried in his friend's throat. Fury broke in him. He raised up with a yell and fired. Out in the darkness he saw a gaudy Ute drop like a horse. They were coming now. Shrieking and howling, sending a rain of arrows into the wagon-fort. Tom Marcy loaded and fired, loaded and fired until the heavy rifle burned his hands.

The Utes were trying to break through the barricade. In front of Tom a brave leapt on the wagon-tongue with upraised tomahawk. Tom's gun was empty. He remembered Bent's. Reaching he swung it up.

"Take that!"

The Ute's horrible grin changed to an amazed frown. Blood gushed from his chest.

Right and left of Tom guns were roaring. The blonde Sumner girl stood with a smoking horse-pistol in her hand. She caught Tom's look.

"I got him," she said.

Wiggin, a sexton in the church, was wielding a pitchfork with the long easy stroke he used in the back pasture at home. But it wasn't hay he was stacking now.

The night was hideous with the shrieks of women, the bellow of the Kentucky flintlocks and the heavier crack of the plains rifles, the frenzied war cries of the Utes, the moaning of wounded oxen and the crying of a new-born baby. Abruptly there was a lull. The Utes had given back.

"What's that thar?" Tom Marcy heard a man next to him growl. "Looks like a white man."

For a moment hope leapt in Tom's breast. He jumped on the wagon-tongue and stared out. Sure enough, there on a spotted pony a white man in buckskin, but he was trying to wave the Indians back.

"Damned renegade," he thought. And fired. But the light was too uncertain. The renegade faded into the night.

Suddenly there was a cry from the other end of camp. Tom Marcy whirled. One of the wagons was in flames. The fire was licking up the timbered sides toward the great bowed top.

Tom ran toward the blaze. The entire half hundred people left of the wagon train, except the sentinels, were trying to put it out. They were throwing on hogsheads of water, beating it with blankets, with anything that came to hand.

As Tom rushed up he heard a woman sobbing. "Oh, what will we do now. There won't be enough water left for the children."

Tom Marcy suddenly leapt into the middle of it. He seized Caleb Shore's arm. "Hold it," he shouted. "Hold it!"

Caleb Shore, boss of the wagon train, turned furiously. "Hold what, you young fool! Let the wagon burn?"

"It's our chance," Tom Marcy flung. "It'll show for miles."

Slowly Caleb Shore lowered the barrel. "Maybe you're right, yonker. But it don't look as if there's another white man within a thousand miles. Nothin' but murderin' savages."

THE first light of morning broke dimly through that lonely circle of wagons. Tom Marcy awoke from a jerky sleep. Caleb Shore was shaking him.

"Wake up," he hissed. "T'is dawn."

The Utes always attacked at daybreak. They loved the half light for their deadly prowls.

Tom Marcy, shivering in the cold, looked over his priming. This was the end. Everybody knew it. Ten good men had been killed the night before.

Suddenly he saw a stealthy gray shape moving in the damp grass. A white feather fluttered. He lined his sights. The still-

ness crashed wide open as the gun kicked back. Then out of the stillness rose that shrill lobo cry that those pioneers had come to know so well.

Tom Marcy's young face took the smile of desperation as he rammed home another load.

On horseback and afoot the half-naked warriors broke over that weak cordon of wagons like a wave of howling maniacs. Guns boomed. Bows twanged. There was the sound like meat on the chopping block as tomahawks flashed. Tom Marcy clubbed his rifle and smashed at the first feathered head. The brave went down but another swarmed in his place.

Strong hands seized the rifle, jerked it from Tom's grasp. He was fighting chest to chest with a slippery Ute, grappling for life. Tom Marcy knew it was the end. Had he come all the way from Ohio to die like this? He gritted his teeth and sent a hard fist into the Indian's jaw. The brave grunted but the knife pressed inexorably down.

He never knew exactly what happened but suddenly the sound of guns was strong again. Then a wild shout. A strange look came over the Ute's face and he tried to break away.

But Tom Marcy could think of nothing now but fight, fight, fight. As the Indian jerked, the rangy youth grabbed the sheath knife. He drove at the warrior's throat where the arrow had gone into Jed. The Ute reeled back and fell.

Tom heard a cry of joy. He saw a woman fling down her smoking gun and climb the barricade. Tom started to rush to stop her. Was she going mad? But as he looked out into the morning mist he saw brown-clad men on shaggy ponies riding and shooting, chasing the wildly fleeing Utes. The mountain men!

He was standing in front of the wagons, shading his eyes, as the gaunt riders trotted back.

"You come just in time," Caleb Shore called. "How'd you know we was needin' help?"

The leader, a great bearded giant, whose legs hung down across his short-coupled pony until they almost touched the ground, answered him shortly.

"Saw thuh blaze. Reckoned it t'was sign."

THE mountain men led the emigrant train on to Roubidou's Fort where it rested before pushing on. But Tom Marcy did not go along when the great white-patched prairie schooners once more swayed out. He stayed on at the fort. Here his real trail began. This fort on the edge of the plains was Sol Gable's stamping-ground and Sol Gable was the man he had come from Ohio to find.

Word seemed to travel quickly in those far places. Marcy was sitting in the trade room one night watching the strange mingling of frontiersmen when the thick door banged and a wolf-eyed man came in. Gable recognized young Marcy almost as quickly as Tom recognized him. On silent moccasins he strode across the room. But Tom tight-lipped, white-faced, stared back unflinchingly into those cruel blood-shot eyes.

Gable sneered. He laughed. The white teeth between his heavy lips bared.

"Ho, ho," bawled Gable. "So you're Sile Marcy's whelp, eh. An' come out here tuh try an' collect somethin' fer that raft he fell off of when he dropped two year ago. Didn't I send word back ter yuh mom that the raft was a wreck? After yer ol' man slopped overboard? An' after Mathers drownded, too? Huh? Yuh've come to collect fer . . . Say!"

Tom Marcy's anger, that had grown during the many nights he had brooded while sitting beside campfires between his faraway home in Ohio and this little frontier fort, suddenly swept away his grip on himself. He smashed at those grinning teeth in the beard.

Hate for this man who had cheated his widowed mother, a lurking suspicion that his father had not fallen overboard but had met foul play at the hands of this stocky half savage bully, put queer fury in his long arms, ran like fire in his lean body.

Instantly there was turmoil in Roubidou's trading room.

With a snarl Gable leaped. There was an instant in which Tom felt the brute power of the man in the arms that grabbed him in a mighty bear hug. The flame of pain ripped at his ear as those teeth that had been grinning in Gable's beard a moment before closed and ripped and tore like the fangs of a wild animal.

Tom twisted free. Like the twanging

of a twisted rawhide bowstring he threw himself on Gable. He smashed with his fists. Then he heard someone yelling to watch out for the knife.

He twisted away and felt the knife slash his sleeve. Gable sprang after him. All Gable's animal ferocity had been unleashed by this stripling who had attempted to fight him. He came gnashing his teeth, growling, his right hand tight over the knife haft, his other hand clutching. Gable laughed as he saw that Tom was unarmed; could not meet him on even terms.

Tom, smashing, leaping, with all his might, crashed into Gable, whirling him. Around them there was wild excitement. Men in buckskin, fringed and beaded, crowded close. Hubbub of voices boiled up.

"Stand back; give 'em room," someone commanded.

"Gable's goin' tuh gouge him," shouted another. "Gouge him, Sol."

TOM MARCY felt utterly alone. He was fighting against powerful brute force, smashing, thrashing, putting the last ounce of his young strength into the furious attack that he hurled at his enemy.

"He's a fightin' yonker," remarked a stout, swart man who stood, arms akimbo, at the end of the little space where Gable swayed back from the ferocity of the lean blond youth's attack. "He's a fighter. A gargajou!"

An instant they were locked tightly. Then the seasoned strength of Gable began to tell. Slowly as though tendons were ripping loose, Gable forced Tom's grip from his knife hand.

In the flickering of the flaming tallow dips that lighted the room, Tom Marcy saw the killer glint in Gable's eyes. Tom struck, slashed, plunged with fury in his sinewy frame, but the bulk of the other man, hard as rock, seasoned as oak, began to tell. It was an uneven fight. Only the ferocity of the long-haired Ohioan, his flashing hate that had smoldered for months, had carried him this far. Now he was beginning to give.

The knife blade raised.

"Thought I stole them logs, did yuh?" snarled Gable. "No one calls me a thief and lives. You brat of Marcy's, chasin' me out here! You—"

He wrenched. The sweeping arc of his knife hand leaped toward Tom Marcy's breast.

With a quick, whirling, tearing move, Gable was yanked away. A long arm, in tanned buckskin, pushed him from his victim.

Gable stumbled against a split log table, crouched. The tall, bearded, thin-nosed man who had interfered, stood still. His hand was at his side. His belt knife was almost within the grip of his fingers. He poised like an eagle ready to strike. But he never moved.

Gable cursed, the oaths writhing from his lips. He slobbered, his teeth gnashing. For the moment he was a wild animal, cheated of his prey.

With a roar he leaped toward the hawk-like man. The next instant he was sprawling under the table from a blow on the jaw. A great sigh welled up from the crowd.

"Hawk Dallas, the hermit," someone said under his breath. "Gable'll kill him."

But Gable stayed on the floor, he shuffled once or twice as though he would bunch himself and spring. Then he got up.

"Yo're takin' on a fight," he snarled at the slim, hard man. "That kid there jumped me fust. You had no right to interfere."

"You were going to kill him," said the Hawk slowly.

"You damn' know it," bellowed Gable suddenly. "He jumped me and called me a thief."

"Maybe he's dead right," commented the Hawk.

He turned, quickly, and strode to the bar.

"Whisky!" he said shortly, commandingly.

"Taos lightnin'. Quick." He pounded the top of the rough bar. "What's the matter, *compadre?* Where is that brew of Turley's? Here, sell me that jug." He swept it to him.

THE crowd dissolved. One or two talked in low tones.

Tom Marcy felt eyes on him as he walked a little shakily toward that lean, bearded man with the piercing eyes. Hawk Dallas turned, grinned at the boy.

"So your name is Marcy, eh?" Hawk Dallas looked at him searchingly for a long moment. Tom had the feeling that this man was looking through and beyond him; as though the Hawk was conjuring up a half-forgotten vision of days gone by. "Mighty funny you comin' here."

"Why is it funny?" demanded Tom.

"Here, son," said Hawk suddenly. "Drink tuh war!"

Their tin cups clinked and then tears leaped to Tom's eyes as the scalding strength of the frontier brew seared his throat.

"Drank like a man," commented Hawk Dallas shrewdly. And yet there was a wistful touch in his voice. "Yuh don't swig from the jug much do you?" he asked.

"That's—rather powerful stuff," commented Tom.

"It's concentrated, double twisted, rawhide hell," said Hawk Dallas solemnly. "I wisht I cud leave the damned stuff alone. But I don't. It helps me forget—sometimes. By midnight I'll be sorry flat. Drink like a gentleman, or don't."

He turned from Tom abruptly to find his way to a stool where a tallow dip flickered above a card game that bearded men played solemnly with a greasy pack of worn cards. Tom wondered at the odd remarks of Hawk, but he knew that he could not question Hawk now.

A SHORT, fat, jolly faced, red-cheeked mountain man was looking keenly at Tom. His eyes were remarkably like shiny round buttons, and his nose was quite like a very deep red radish. He moved toward Tom, seeming to roll rather than walk.

"By hoss an' beaver!" he rumbled, his heavy voice seeming to come from some hidden cavern of his barrel chest. "Yuh fit like a crazy panther while yuh fit. No mountain man, are yuh?"

"River," said Tom looking down out of his blue eyes at this one man who seemed to be friendly. "Ohio. My Paw was handlin' rafts there ontil couple year back. Report came back tuh us that he'd drowned when he fell off 'bout Natchez. This Gable was on th' raft with him at the time. There was another fellow named Mather on the raft, but he was reported drowned too.

"I had tuh wait ontil my brother Sid got big enough tuh take care of the family. Then I started out tuh find Gable and make him settle for that raft. When I got talking to him a moment ago I lost my temper. I found out it wan't wrecked at all. Gable sold it at Natchez."

"Oh!" observed the short man, his bushy brows lifting significantly. "Sorta jumped him about it?"

Tom nodded.

"Plenty guts; dam' poor jedgment. My name's Pony McSpeeden. I'm no friend of Gable's either. Let's drink tuh his confoundin'!"

Their tin cups touched. Again Tom had the feeling that he had swallowed racing poison.

"You say there was another feller named Mather on that raft?" asked Pony. "What fer lookin' fellow was he?"

"River man," answered Tom. "Lean, about thirty, near six feet tall. Why?"

"Nothin'," said Pony, his eyes squinting.

They leaned against the rough counter that served for trading table, bar and general place of barter. Around them surged the hectic night life of the fall rendezvous. French trappers in capotes, their dark bushy beards and bright colored sashes contrasting with the lean, tanned men in buckskin who had come to the Rockies out of Kentucky, Tennessee and Missouri.

The dim light of the tallow dips threw flickering shadows on adobe walls.

Stoical Indian women, wives of the trappers, occasionally came through the hubbub, spoke to their spouses, perhaps stopped to dicker at the bar. A few taciturn braves lined the wall, watching several card games. The voices of the men haggling mingled with the squalling of a half-breed baby.

TOM saw Gable hunched in a corner. The renegade had a tin cup in his hand, a jug on the table at his elbow. He was scowling at Hawk Dallas.

Tom's eyes traveled to the man who had saved him from that vital knife thrust; who by the very dynamic power of his eye, had driven Gable back from attack.

Pony McSpeeden chuckled.

"Found an' enemy," he observed, "An' I rather think, maybe made a friend tuh-night. Hawk Dallas don't usually make friends, but neither does he often interfere

with a row. Some reason fer his interferin'."

"Who is he?" asked Tom. He wanted to know more of the lean, clean-limbed man whose beard was slightly touched with silver.

"No one knows," said Pony in a low voice. "Hermit trapper he is. Brings in lots of peltry. Folks say he drinks it all up. Some say he's right well edicated sort. I lays my sights he's some blue blood as is hidin' out. He looks it, don't he?"

They sipped at the powerful liquor in the cups. Pony lifted his potion.

"Roubidou don't serve no bad stuff," he remarked. "Turley's Mill supplies this here chain lightnin'. Turley's distillery's over on Arroyo Hondo, north of Taos. Neighbor of Kit Carson's. Good man, Turley."

Evening passed. Tom walked into the camp that surrounded the fort where the Tomich and the Uncompahgre boiled together. Pony went with him.

"Better walk tuhgether," he said laconically. "We both don't trust that Piute Gable. That's enough tuh make us friends. Just two factions here: Gable's gang an' them that's white men. But the white men ain't strong enough to jump him—or won't.

"He got away with some of my traps last winter. I'm sure of it. But kain't prove it nohow. He's got some power here; quite a gang that follows him. But he's no *bueno*. He tumbles lies outa his mouth like boudins outa a bluffer's stomach.

"Waugh!" exploded Pony. "Knifes might jump outa the dark at either of us. We'll tribe up, you and me. What say?"

Smoke floated on the night air. At one bright fire, a squaw skinned out a deer carcass, the hide serving as a spread on which the meat was kept from the dirt. Another fire smoked dried venison on a green pole rack.

Dogs yowled and barked. A card game was in progress on a Navaho blanket where a campfire gave light. In another the mellowing influence of Turley's Taos Lightning had lit up song in the throats of a dozen trappers. Stern, exacting their life was in the winter. Rendezvous was a time for revelry, and song.

It was near midnight when they finally turned back to the mud-walled fort.

"Hawk Dallas'll be dead to the world by now," remarked Tom. "I'm just wondering if he's safe by himself after that brush with Gable?"

"Might take him tuh my camp," suggested Pony. "Gable's shore half froze fer his har right now."

Tacitly they had agreed by now that for the rest of the rendezvous, they would throw fortunes together. Already Pony was urging Tom to spend the coming season in the hills. So it was that they acted together when they sought Hawk Dallas, in the trading room.

II

HAWK DALLAS was drowsing back of a table. Pony McSpeeden casually led the way to the bar. He turned to survey the smoky room.

"See them two fellers sittin' acrost from Hawk?" he asked, whispering.

Tom nodded.

"Well," continued Pony, "them's part of Sol Gable's bunch of throat splitters. Take a good look at them. That hoss-faced feller on th' left's Piute Slaydon. The feller 'ats scowlin' out o' habit is Santa Fe Sanchez. Ef yuh ever expect to lift Gable's har maybe you'll have tuh flesh an' grain these *hombres* too."

He laughed shortly.

"They're watchin' Hawk Dallas now," he commented. "Probably waitin' tuh git him outside an' spring a trap on him. We'll just fool them buzzards."

Pony strode toward Dallas where he drowsed. He took hold of Hawk's shoulder and shook him.

Hawk Dallas looked up sharply, his eyes suddenly clearing.

"Come on Hawk," suggested Pony softly. "Time tuh let up fer the evenin'."

"Take your hands off me," snapped Hawk Dallas. "Take them off, I say!" He suddenly raised up his full height, his eyes blazing at Pony. Something of the aristocrat cropped out in Hawk's resentment at having hands laid on him. But the short, red faced trapper stood his ground. Hawk suddenly seemed to retreat within himself and then nodded.

"I guess you're right," he mumbled. "You're right."

He started swaying toward the door. Pony was at his heels. Piute Slaydon and

Sanchez left hurriedly by another door. Pony took a quick glance at them. Pony, Hawk and Tom reached the portal.

"Here," commanded Pony, quickly thrusting a short length of firewood into Tom's hands. "Maybe they'll jump us."

They were barely outside when the two men rushed them. Tom swung at a shadowy form. He saw it reel away. But the other reached the stumbling shadow of Hawk Dallas. Tom heard a quick sharp exclamation and then he saw the diving bulk of Pony McSpeeden crashing into the man near Hawk. There was a moment of sharp tussle. Then the flaming of a fat pine torch lit the night.

Tom looked for the two assailants. They had gone; melted into the night like quick diving shadows of bats.

On the ground, slumped in a huddle, was Hawk Dallas. Standing over him with a red stain on his hands, was Pony McSpeeden. He held a knife that Tom knew had been wrenched from the hands of that member of Gable's gang.

THE burly form of Roubidou, the trader, headed the little crowd that came shoving out of the room. He was a dynamic, commanding frontiersman.

"Robbery, heh?" he snapped as he came up to Pony. "Tryin' tuh take Dallas hide, heh? Wanted that trade script on him, heh? Then out you go!"

"Look here, Roubidou," began Pony in protest. "It was them two men of Gable's."

"Where are they now?" demanded Roubidou angrily. "You're a good fer nothin'—"

"I tell you, sir, that there were others," broke in Tom Marcy. "Two of them. They followed us out here."

"There wan't none that followed these fellers out," broke in a voice.

"Why, listen to his yap," snapped Pony. "He's another of Gable's—"

"Run him out of the camp," suddenly demanded Gable himself as he came elbowing in. "Don't let them kind stay here, Roubidou. Let's have a trapper's court fer both of them; an' then hang up their hides."

"Oh, yo're tryin' tuh defend Hawk Dallas now, are you?" demanded Pony, stepping up belligerently. "You didn't send Piute Slaydon an' Sanchez to do him up in the dark, did you?"

"I'll not stand for such yowlin' from this—" began Gable, leaping, driving toward Pony.

Roubidou suddenly stood between them.

"Get out of camp," commanded the trader as he faced Pony. "Git before daylight. Now. Maybe yo're right an' maybe yo're wrong. But looks are again' yuh. You get out of here and do it pronto!"

Pony protested. With a motion, Roubidou called one of his men to his side.

"See that he goes," he said. There was the absolute power of a feudal lord in the way he commanded. It was arbitrary, it was unjust, Tom Marcy knew, but Roubidou's word in that fort was law.

With a pistol in hand, Roubidou's man followed Pony out of the circle of light. Two men quickly picked up Hawk Dallas and took him into the trader's own house. Examination had shown he was more unconscious from Taos lightning than from the attack. Tom knew Hawk was safe in Roubidou's quarters. But there might be retribution against Pony McSpeeden.

He hurried after Pony and the man with a pistol. Tom's first thought had been to see that Hawk was safe. Then he wanted to find Pony. Together they would clear his new friend of that accusation that he had been the one that had let blood of the Hawk.

He did not know the location of Pony's camp. Tom stumbled into the center of a sleeping group of half breeds; got cursed. A dog yapped at his heels. He avoided another campfire. He found men around a fire playing euchre and asked if they knew where Pony was camped. They did not even know the little short, happy-eyed adventurer.

He turned back toward the fort. He searched the edge of the camp. A half hour passed. Finally the fort had quieted and the doors were closed. A few men lay sleeping in the mud-walled compound. Tom sought his own blanket, realizing that Pony McSpeeden, one of two friends he had made, was gone. Hawk Dallas, friendly at first, now might take the attitude of the others.

EXHAUSTION, his training to sleep with the turmoil of camp around him, tricked Tom Marcy. It was full day when he awakened. He had planned to hurry on

the trail of Pony McSpeeden and insist that they should seek Roubidou. The evidence was against them, but they might convince Roubidou of the truth; and find Hawk Dallas and convince him, too. Tom wanted to be friends with that lean, imperious, aristocratic hermit trapper.

He found the man of Roubidou's who had run Pony out of camp, and learned that Pony had packed and left immediately, heading toward Cochetopa Pass, as though going out toward Taos.

It was midday before Tom found out all of this. Apparently Pony McSpeeden had thought it easier to move on than try to fight against the evidence that was so much against him. Tom turned again to the trader's room, bent on finding Hawk Dallas. He was anxious to learn how badly the older man had been knifed.

"Gone," said Roubidou shortly, eyeing Tom with a tinge of suspicion. "Hit the trail early."

"Wasn't he wounded?"

"Not much. Just a scratch."

"Which trail?" asked Tom.

"He didn't say," countered Roubidou. "Never does."

Tom Marcy looked at the powerful, steady eyed man that was ruler of this little outpost fort. He could surmise now why it was that Pony McSpeeden had not tried to come back and argue the matter; had chosen to go on as ordered. In the frontier forts the trader was the ruler; it was his domain and his word was the law.

"Look here, young fella," suddenly demanded Roubidou. "How did you get tangled up in those fights last night?"

Quickly, eagerly, Tom told him. As he recited the whole sequence of events, told of their coming back to see that Hawk Dallas did not suffer at the hands of Gable's rowdies, there was no change of expression on Roubidou's visage. He merely grunted and nodded even when Tom told him why he had come West.

"What you goin' tuh do now?" demanded Roubidou at the end of the recital.

"I'd like to outfit and see if I can find Hawk Dallas," said Tom suddenly, voicing something that had been in his mind since the night before. "But before I go back I must know the truth about what happened to my paw and I'm goin' to kill Gable if I can discover that he done for my father."

Again Roubidou grunted. The trading room was almost deserted. Tom felt strangely drawn to this man. There was something square and true in the big fellow and Tom began to realize that even in his mistake in sending Pony away, Roubidou had administered the law as he had seen it at the moment.

"Dallas don't like company," said Roubidou shortly. "But ef you want tuh outfit I'll see that yuh git a mountain man's trappin's. You'll be wantin' to go out som-eres this winter, I reckon since yuh kain't get back now to Ohio afore snow blocks trails.

"And don't think that Gable's forgot last night," he added warningly. "He's never known to fergit. An' if he knows you're in here watchin' him or huntin' him, then he'll git yuh fust ef he kin.

"Ef yuh see Pony McSpeeden tell him to come back," he added. Tom knew then that Roubidou had revised his ideas concerning the fight of the night before.

III

THE entire following day Tom Marcy scouted around the fort in an effort to find any clue as to which direction Hawk Dallas was likely to take. He had not tried to analyze why he wanted to find Hawk. Yet some half-formed desire to know the Hawk urged him on. Tom quizzed several concerning Hawk Dallas. The trappers shook their heads.

"He runs alone," said one of them shortly. "Nobody knows where. He doesn't tell."

Twice while moving around the fort Tom encountered some of Gable's men. They gave him scowls, but did not molest him.

Tom Marcy awoke the next morning with a start. He rubbed his eyes. Then he blinked.

Across the little campfire, sitting on his haunches, watching Tom as he came out of his night's sleep, squatted Hawk Dallas.

"Where did you come from?" demanded Tom.

Hawk Dallas ignored the question.

"Come on, git this grub inside of you," he said almost taciturnly. "We've got to git goin'."

They ate breakfast almost in silence. Several times Tom tried to ask questions that

he had wanted to put to Hawk. But Hawk ignored them completely. Tom surprised Dallas twice when the older man was eyeing him keenly, searching him with a gaze that made Tom feel as though he was looking clear through him.

"What was you tangled with Gable about the other night?" demanded Dallas suddenly.

Prompted by some deep intuition that he had found a real friend here, Tom told of his trip west to find the man he suspected of doing away with his father, the man who had stolen the raft and made off with the proceeds.

"So Silas Marcy's dead," breathed Hawk softly.

"Did you know him?" demanded Tom, excitement in his voice.

Slowly Hawk Dallas filled his pipe, smoked, squinted his eyes as he looked at the far mountains.

"Gable'll kill you," he said quietly, wholly ignoring Tom's query, "first chance he gets. Or his men will."

"But I'm out here to get him as soon as I know certainly he was responsible for my father's death?" protested Tom. "Two can play at that game!"

"Not when Sol Gable plays," said Hawk softly. "He never gives the other fellow an Indian's chance."

"But I'll—"

"He's got about a dozen men that trail with him," broke in Hawk slowly. "You can't fight the whole pack, son. That's partly why I came back—partly."

"But look here—" began Tom again.

"I CAME back because I knew if I didn't you'd do some fool thing," continued Hawk. "Yo're goin' with me to my trappin' grounds. Stay the winter. I'll train you. Teach you every trick of trapper fighting. Then you can meet Gable next rendezvous on even ground. And perhaps meanwhile you can pick up enough information for you to make certain that what you suspect is true."

"But I want to settle this now—"

"Time is of no value out here," said Hawk slowly, his steady eyes boring into Tom's. "We have lots of it. You can wait. And meanwhile I'll make you a mountain man. You're going with me, understand. But don't ask me questions, do you hear?"

The last command was almost vehement.

Hawk arose and strode off toward the trader's little compound. At the trading table Hawk purchased a few more supplies. He held his left shoulder a bit awkwardly because of the knife cut.

Roubidou's eyes opened as he saw the two before his counter. It was Hawk Dallas that told of their new alliance.

"Takin' Tom Marcy along with me," he said briefly. "If he comes back here any time without me let him have what he asks for."

Roubidou agreed.

The morning sun was well up above the horizon as they finally started on the trail which led up the Tomichi. Hawk Dallas, silent, with that indefinable air of mystery seeming to cloak him, rode in the lead. Tom rode in the rear of the little pack train that carried their supplies and equipment.

Only once more Tom had tried to question Hawk. His new partner had turned on him fiercely and Tom had held his tongue.

FOR two days they traveled up over the benchy meadows northward from the Tomichi. Then they turned up a side stream and headed toward where a mighty range of serrated mountains reached into the blue heavens.

Several times Tom had tried to probe into Hawk Dallas' thoughts by strategy to find why he had been prompted to come back to Roubidou's, but he had received no answer.

Tom Marcy knew that there was something under the surface in this move. He sensed it keenly from little actions, from that queer way in which Hawk Dallas stared at him. Several times he suddenly realized as they talked around the campfire, that Hawk Dallas was leading him out to tell more of the life in Ohio, of his work there, his father, his mother and the others of the family.

Tom racked his thoughts to try to find an explanation, but he could arrive at none. At moments Hawk Dallas seemed strangely familiar; then suddenly became a total stranger.

As they rode toward the mountains the rocky barrier appeared solid. They followed a canyon, then swung to a side canyon and reached a ridge which was without

timber but knee deep with bright fall flowers of the mountain meadows.

They came to a point where the little stream they followed was nothing but a tiny brook, flowing through a high meadow where it twisted between grassy banks. Before them was the cloud splitting range. Dallas kept directly toward it. As they reached the face of the mountain Tom saw a sharp split in the rock where a game trail entered. Hawk Dallas grinned a little as Tom rode up exclaiming.

"My own little private pass into good trapping," Hawk explained. "All of them have been trying to find it. None have yet."

He turned into the narrow defile. Remnants of snow were on either side. At one point they crossed snow where a slide had stacked the white stuff yards deep; it had not melted during the entire summer. Tom realized that this pass must be tightly closed during the winter, was slow to open in spring.

At the far end they stopped. Hawk got off. There was a little camping space and in a short time the camp was made. Hawk had not unsaddled his horse. He mounted again.

"You get something to eat," he directed Tom. "I always go back to be sure no one has followed. Usually they do not try. I've always put them off the track, lost them before I got here. But someone might."

TOM was busy around the camp, making fire, getting wood for the night, cutting strips of venison to broil over coals. Above, the rocky wall of the mountain crests lifted almost straight up. The gash in the rock was the only visible break as far as he could see this rocky cliff. All else was solid rock.

Softened by the wind, mellowed by distance, there came the sudden reverberation of rifle fire.

Tom leaped to his gun. He hurriedly saddled his horse and started back toward the point where the shooting was going on.

He stopped his horse in headlong charge inside the far end of the gorge and dismounted. He crept ahead.

The firing had stopped. Tom knew that a little battle was being waged and scouted carefully. Just before he came out to the far side he met Hawk Dallas coming back. The older man was scowling.

"Gable's men," he said briefly. "He's been tryin' to trail me ever since he came out here. Sanchez and that Piute Slaydon were inside the gorge when I went back. Must have kept us in sight from the time we left Roubidou's.

"Will we follow them?" asked Tom quickly.

"I think I winged one of them," said Dallas slowly. "Reckon we better trail 'em a bit. I was coming back to get you."

He turned his horse. They took up the trail at the far end of the gorge and hurried forward. Dusk crept into the mountains. Once they saw the two figures on horseback far ahead on a benchland meadow and then they lost them again. Night came and Hawk Dallas stopped.

"Guess it's no use," he said shortly. "We might as well get back. If we keep on going we may stumble into a whole nest of them."

By midday following they came to the center of the hidden basin. Hawk Dallas had made his winter camp in a little one-room, part log, part stone, dirt floored cabin at the edge of a mountain. This shelter was in the open, hunched down in a bank, in a position where one man could guard it against the attack of several besiegers.

"Any other way out of this basin?" asked Tom as they reached the cabin.

"There is a trail downstream," said Dallas. "It leads down to near Yampa Springs and the Colorado River, but I never come in that way. It would be easier for others to find that trail. This trail through the cleft in the rock was easier to keep secret, but now Gable knows it. He may figure out how he can get in here from the river."

IT was the second day they were working around the cabin that both started for their guns when one of the pack horses, pastured in a pole enclosure, neighed warning. Hawk Dallas slowly raised his old rifle as horsemen came down the trail from the cleft.

It was Gable and seven men. He rode up with a leering grin on his face.

"Hello, Hawk," he said with sinister jocularity. "So this is the hawk's nest."

"Get out of here," said Dallas shortly. "This is my territory."

"It's a free country," replied Gable. "Free an' open hunting and trapping. We're ridin through peaceful."

He laughed again.

"Mighty good beaver in here," he remarked, after a second's pause. "Enough for two trappin' parties."

"Not enough," said Hawk Dallas bluntly. "Git out of my trapping territory, Gable, or I'll see that you never leave it."

Gable's eyes suddenly became hard and the lines around his mouth set.

"Huh," he exploded. "Think yuh kin keep me out of this country, do you? Well, we've found it now; we're going to have it. You move on, savvy? You know what happens, Hawk, when Sol Gable says a certain trappin' ground is goin' tuh be his."

The nose of the old rifle kept steadily pointed at Gable's breast. Every man in the group knew that if a false move was made Gable would die first. Gable knew it better than all the others, for he was looking into the eyes of Hawk.

A slow, nasty grin spread over his face.

"Oh, all right, Hawk," he said chuckling a little. "Go ahead and trap this winter. We'll be back later."

Turning his horse, he rode away, not back over the cleft pass, but toward the Colorado River country into which this high secret basin drained.

"He's got the lay of it," said Hawk Dallas slowly. "Probably recognized landmarks from higher up. No more secret for this basin, I guess. Gable knows the river trails down below. And as long as he knows trails in from both ends we're not going to be safe."

"Safe from just what?" demanded Tom.

"Occasionally there are trappers who do not come back to the rendezvous," said Hawk Dallas slowly. "Some—er—accident in the hills keeps 'em from it. But there is never any fur discovered at their camps. Gable's figured out that he'll let us work here this winter, and then come back before we leave in the spring. He'll try to keep us from ever seein' the fort again. And he figures he'll have a nice bundle of fur to take along that he doesn't have to work for."

"You mean he'd sneak up and kill us?"

Hawk nodded solemnly.

"I read it in his eyes," he said with conviction. "I saw it."

For the first time Tom Marcy was struck with the full realization of the law of fang and claw that ruled here. Every man fought for his right to live. Gable would rub them out without compunction. He would steal their furs. And he would think it a huge joke on Tom and Hawk if he did it.

"Reckon it would be safer to find a new trapping grounds?" asked Tom, the question popping into his mind and out of his mouth before he thought further.

"No," roared Hawk Dallas, turning on him fiercely. "No! We'll fight it out here. That skunk can't run me out of my rightful trapping grounds. If he tries I'll kill him!"

IV

GOLD of autumn lacquered the hills where aspen thickets burned yellow at frost time. Sugary snow powdered the tops of the range. Ice began to form in the creeks. The horses were shifted over to a park that Hawk Dallas knew would stay open enough for them to find forage all winter.

New strength came to Tom Marcy's muscles as he worked under the direction of Hawk Dallas. The lore of setting traps, the work of slipping the furry coat from the beaver, the science of graining and drying the hides; these came to him naturally. And Hawk was a master to teach every intricate trick of the trade.

In the evening there would be moments when they would face each other while their rifles leaned against the cabin. There were seconds when they struggled in fierce conflict; conflict that ended without injury to either, because Hawk Dallas was coaching Tom Marcy for the day when he might meet Sol Gable.

The fight of the frontier had one lone rule. And that rule was to win. Any trick, any ruse was within the scope of the combatants. Hawk Dallas, keen observer of many a fight at rendezvous, showed Tom Marcy every trick and how to meet it.

Winter clamped down. They struggled through mountain snow. The pelts became heavier, darker. There were hours when the whipping snow kept them inside, days when they went after the harvest of the other fur bearers while the beaver were

frozen in. After that snow showed melted spots, streams began to flood, new green dress of aspen trees cloaked bare limbs, and the bears came out of their winter sleeping quarters.

Often through that long winter Tom Marcy wanted to question Hawk Dallas. But each time the studied reserve of his partner kept him from putting those questions.

"GABLE'LL be coming back one of these days," said Hawk abruptly one evening. "It's almost time to get out over the pass. Snow there yet. If we'll unload the horses, break way for them, and rig up travois for the furs, instead of packing them on the saddles, we'll make it. Gable'll come around the river trail. We'll outfox him by beating him over the pass." He smiled grimly to himself.

Tom glanced at the bundle of rich fur stacked in one side of the cabin. There were other bundles in the caches where they had stored them. It was a small fortune. Again came to him the question of why Hawk Dallas, mystery man, had asked him to share in the winter's work. Tom suddenly put the question directly to his partner.

Dallas looked at him keenly. Tom saw a deepening of color of his eyes.

"There is a reason all right," answered Hawk slowly. "A right good reason. But I'll not say now. Later maybe, when we've got out."

He shut his mouth abruptly and turned away to continue graining a beaver pelt. The next day he rode to the pass, but came back gloomy.

"Won't be open for days yet," he said. "Extra heavy snow there. I'd try to get out this other way, but I'm certain as can be that Gable's left an ambush on that lower trail. We'll stick here until the pass opens, I guess, and fight it out if we have to."

They were more keenly alert now, watching, cutting the trail toward the river often. Wary as they left camp, wary as they returned, one keeping guard while the other was away following traplines. The caches were opened and the tight bales of beaver were stacked inside of the cabin in case they had to make a quick move or were besieged.

THE attack came suddenly and swiftly. Tom Marcy had been out on trap lines. As he returned a sudden burst of rifle fire in the valley came echoing up to him. He guided his horse, Humpribs, down the side of the hill, crashing through thickets, over fallen logs, driving to the place where Hawk Dallas was guarding the little cabin.

Humpribs plunged to the edge of the clearing. Tom pulled him up short, got off, and hid the pony in the thickets. Then he went crouching through the edge of the spruce stands.

He saw shot slap into the side of the cabin. Another rifle spoke, this time from the cabin. Tom saw the little bunch of Gable's men back of a big log.

With a quick sweeping motion, Tom threw up his long rifle. He had knocked squirrels out of trees at almost this distance. He let fly. One of the men sprang free, ran, stumbled, ran again.

Then they were all scuttling to shelter. Out from the cabin came the flanking fire of Hawk's gun. Tom let fly again.

He could see Gable himself in the lead. One man limped. Tom shot again. One fell. Others helped the wounded man up, but he stumbled and slowed them.

The old rifle in the hands of Hawk bellowed again.

Gable's band broke into a run. They went charging into a thicket. Tom sent a rifle ball whizzing into the screen and saw commotion there.

Gable's men came charging out on horseback, heading for the down trail. Caught between two rifle fires Gable chose to run. He had counted on surprise, but had met stern preparedness.

Tom leaped clear, rushed to the cabin, threw open the door.

"Hawk, you hurt?" he asked quickly. "Did they touch you?"

"Reckon," said the older man shortly. "Leg shattered. Twists funny when I try to walk on it."

Sharp panic came racing then to Tom Marcy. If Hawk could not travel, they were anchored here. Gable would come back with more men, bottle them, hold them, and slowly crush them. He would not risk an attack again, for he knew now that they were watching. But he would prevent them from getting away.

"Here, let's see what happened," said Tom as he threw open the door a little to admit afternoon light.

He knew the moment he saw that queerly twisted ankle that Hawk Dallas could travel only on some sort of litter. Hawk knew too.

"Have to act quickly," said Hawk tersely. "I'll stay here. Keep 'em busy. You get the horses packed, go right down the creek tonight after dark, leading them. Then when you get clear, go over the river trail to Roubidou's."

"And come back with help," said Tom.

"If you can make it in time," said Hawk evenly.

"I can make it," said Tom. "But I reckon after all I'll stay here and fight it out with you."

"Do as I say!" stormed Hawk, suddenly flaring. "You git out of here. Take those packs. I'm commanding here. You have got to go tonight. Get to Roubidou's."

"But—"

"You do as I command," burst out Hawk. "You go!"

FOR a moment the two faced each other's eyes. There was something more than a father and son relationship here. Something stronger than mere blood ties. Tom knew it when that instant had passed. The winter had welded bonds between them. They were partners. And Hawk Dallas was ready to face wilderness death so Tom Marcy could get through to Roubidou's.

"You do stand a chance of getting there and back, Tom," said Hawk after that instant had passed. "Roubidou will come if you can get to him. And there is another reason you've got to go."

He stopped a moment, looking out of the door. A sudden shot of pain seemed to race through him as he shifted his leg. Tom made a move to bandage it. Hawk motioned for him to stop.

"Wait," he said. "I'm going to tell you now. Maybe won't have a chance later. Maybe Gable will come back and we'll both be busy. These people know me as Hawk Dallas. It's a good name. I have let it stand. But your mother knew me as Dallas Freeman."

"Dallas Freeman!"

"Yes, you recognize the name?"

Tom stared at the aristocratic, highly bred face of the man before him. This was the man who had left his old home and headed west when Tom's mother had chosen between two good men and Silas Marcy had been the one she had chosen.

"Now you understand?" asked Hawk softly. "I had planned to go back with you, Tom. To Ohio. I've thought maybe she needs me back there. But I can't make it now; I can't run the risk of keeping you here. You must go out to her. And I'll keep Gable busy while you go. Here's scrip' worth thousands of dollars. The traders thought I drank it all up. I drank some; not all. I was keeping it because—"

He looked at the trading script in his hand.

"Roubidou will cash this for you. And the winter's catch is worth money too. Give it to her. She can use it."

Hawk thrust the bundle into Tom's hands, the script all bunched with the little beaded bag in which Hawk had carried it.

"But I'll stay here and we'll both go out," burst out Tom. "If my mother knew that I left you here—"

"Has she ever said anything about me?"

"Yes. Since my dad did not come back. And he used to talk about you often too; your fairness, the way you both courted her on fair basis and you lost and he won. You've got to go back with me to the East, Hawk!"

For an instant there glowed some fiery, determined light in the eyes of Hawk. Then his eyes dropped to his twisted foot.

"Hardly travel that far, Tom," he said laconically. "Not this way. You can. You've got to be the one to go. And if you go fast enough you can get to Roubidou's and back before my ammunition plays out. I can keep them off until then. Now hurry!"

V

TOM MARCY improvised a rough splint for Hawks' shattered leg. He rounded up the horses at dusk without seeing any sign of Gable. Then he packed the pelts on the animals and saddled his own pony.

He stood in the darkness of the little cabin. Silently he gripped his partner's hand. His father had been another such

a man. Tom Marcy resolved as he stood there, without speaking a word, that Gable would not wrench away the chance of Dallas Freeman to see Ella Marcy again. For Tom Marcy now understood all of that mysterious interest that Hawk had shown in him, the hunger for knowledge of his mother when Hawk had asked guarded questions, that fine last bit of sacrifice that Hawk was making in holding Gable while Ella Marcy's boy should be safe on the way to Roubidou's.

"Right down the stream, Tom," said Hawk. "And then cut off on the stony patch below and they'll not catch your trail."

Tom Marcy led the way with the pack train stringing out behind, loaded with the valuable winter's catch.

But he did not take the water trail. A scheme had come into his mind. He knew his horses were fresh. He knew that Gable would follow if he realized that Tom Marcy was heading out with peltry. And Tom Marcy was going to leave plenty of trail for them to follow. He would lead Gable away, beating him to the fort, then return with Roubidou's men and follow him back so closely that he would not reach Hawk before help could get there too.

The last afterglow faded from the sky. Tom forded a stream that was a torrent from late melting snow. Night came creeping into the mountains. He rode cautiously. Only his caution kept him from stumbling into the camp where Gable had set up his guard on the out trail at a narrow place in the canyon.

Tom turned up a side stream, followed a game trail, crossed into a little stream below, started whacking the pack horses down the trail. He risked meeting someone riding up the trail, in the dark.

Wolves howled on a ridge, a chorus of coyotes squalled and yammered back of him. Night winds whispered of forest secrets. The friendly wilderness cloaked him.

As he rode, Tom Marcy knew that the last touch with his boyhood days was all behind him; that ahead was a man's job and that he was a man to fight it through.

For he would never let Gable reach Hawk.

Another day. With the morning's first light, he looked back at the plain trail he had left and grinned. It was a run for it now. He had a full night's start. It was a race from here on.

But the heavily laden pack horses were beginning to show fatigue. He stopped, spent precious minutes while they drank and cropped grass hungrily, and then he herded them into the trail and shoved them along again.

Noon came; the sun started down. As evening light sifted into the canyons he reached a wide meadow bordering the banks of the Colorado.

He stopped to rest the saddle stock, to cook a bit of supper over a fire of dry river drift wood. He picketed Humpribs and hobbled the pack stock. His eyes kept roving back along the trail he had come. He could see it for two miles.

Humpribs whinnied and faced downstream. Tom whirled, grabbing for his gun.

HORSEMEN were coming. Gable was in the lead. Piute Slaydon was riding close at his heels. And back of them were seven others. Tom realized that they had cut over a divide on one of the spur ranges and headed him while he had followed the longer river trail.

Powder smoke plumed from the rifle in Gable's hands. Tom dropped to his knee, sighted, saw the horse that Gable was riding tumble and roll, throwing Slaydon's horse into a heap. He had shot to stop them.

In the precious moment that they were getting the horses untangled he loaded his rifle. Carefully he sighted. Gable was somewhere among the horses. But his sights were on Slaydon. He pulled the trigger. Slaydon whirled, stumbled, got up, stumbled again and lay kicking.

New confusion and hesitancy came into the group of attackers. They were firing from where they were stopped. Tom saw one of his own pack horses break loose and stampede away. Another was down, hit by a stray ball.

He leaped to the dead horse and used it for a breastwork. He sighted on another man. He saw him tumble. The deadly work of the old squirrel rifle threw consternation into that bunch. If they had driven on they could have overwhelmed him. But each of Gable's riders had the

fear of sudden death in his heart. And that fear stopped them.

Tom threw a new charge into the rifle. Aimed again. He had caught sight of Gable now. He fired. Gable ducked and twisted as though he sensed that he was over those rifle sights. A horse went pitching and charging into the group, scattering them.

Tom saw Humpribs fall and kick. He knew he was stranded afoot. Only one of the pack horses was still near. The others had hobbled away from the danger zone.

Only the spirit of combat, the deep grounded determination to fight through kept Tom Marcy from acknowledging defeat. But the remembrance of Hawk back there, foot crippled, watching out the window for the coming of Gable, spurred him on to battle through; that and Tom's fiery determination that he would bring Gable to accounting for whatever had happened back there on the raft in the Mississippi.

But Tom Marcy knew that only some desperate venture would bring him out of the trap into which he had been forced by Gable.

TOM crouched on the bank of the river and watched. Once he raised up and shot at one of those shadows that moved at the edge of the timber across the open space.

Back of him the river roared and sang; louder, more boisterously, more daringly than the Ohio when it was at flood stage. He moved along the dusk shrouded bank. He passed the tangle of dry spruce logs, washed high at flood of some former year; the dry wood that had tempted him to stop here for his camp. He moved back up the bank.

Then came an insistent voice that called to him. Half forgotten tones began to creep into his ears like some old friend whispering.

He walked up the bank. He scouted the open plain in front of him. They were not trying to come across. They would wait, knowing that he was caught. Again that voice came to Tom Marcy. And he recognized it.

It was the river. He turned and looked at the white torrent as it raced madly by the bank. It was unlike his old friend the Ohio. But it was a river and Tom Marcy had been reared on the banks of a great river.

It was his once big chance. With a run, he was back at that tangle of logs from which he had cut firewood earlier in the evening. There were almost a dozen; some broken, some rotted beyond use, but a few that could be whipped into a raft. With new fight drumming in his veins, Tom raced up the bank and crouched as he ran to cut fresh rawhide thongs from the dead horses. And then he came back hurrying in his efforts to get the work done.

It was a wild chance, a daring undertaking. But once caught in that giant force of the river, he would hurtle toward Roubidou's at the speed of a racehorse.

VI

GRAY dawn broke. Tom Marcy started packing the beaver fur to the clumsy raft that he had put together during the hours of the night. He almost laughed as he lashed them tight with the thongs.

A long pole served as a sweep. Tom had constructed a light log railing around the edge to help keep packs on if they got loose and started washing around the raft. It floated, high enough, was fairly staunch. It would take sharp rocks and driving force to cut the fresh rawhide thongs that held it together.

He jerked the last thong tight with a tug, knotted it.

He trotted up the bank. Across the open space, he worked ahead Indian fashion toward Gable's men. He took quick sights on the first one he saw; fired. The man flattened out. The others scattered to new shelter before he could reload.

Tom turned and leaped down the bank of the river.

Slowly at first, then with the increased racing speed when the current got its grip, the raft started its plunge.

Back of him Tom heard a yell. It was Gable. He had found out what had happened. There was other yelling. And then Tom saw them coming, racing their horses, firing. Lead sang around him. He flattened out below the pile of beaver hides and shot back. They stopped a moment then, but soon came racing and firing at him.

One of them got on a bank, high above the stream. Tom saw the raft was swinging in. He could hear Gable cursing, and then he heard the rumble of the next rapids below. He fired at the man who was climbing the bluff. But Tom Marcy knew as he sent that shot that within a few brief moments he would be swung by the current under that bluff and they would be able to shoot down on him; the breastwork of the furs would be futile.

He reloaded, sighted, fired. An answering shot came whining at him, slugged into the side of the raft, went whirling away, whining a death song. Another bullet splashed just back of him.

TOM MARCY stood up quickly, swayed, threw up his hands, and then slumped over the side of the raft.

"Got him, got him!" yelled Gable on the bank. And then started running along the side of the bank.

But Tom Marcy was gripping the edge of the raft, the icy water of the river tugging at his feet, the chill of it making his teeth chatter. He had pretended that they had hit him. Clinging to the side, the protection of the raft was between him and those men on the bank. His greatest concern now was to keep the raft from bumping its nose into the bank or crashing on reefs.

Five miles farther on the raft finally quit the crazy death dance that had threatened to pitch its contents into the river at every new wave. Rocks had clawed at it, the waves had licked at it, and yet it had held together and Tom Marcy had stood on it while it raced like a wild thing alive through the spumey cauldron of the chute.

He edged the raft into the bank. One of the thongs had parted. Tom cut new ones from outside beaver pelts, soaked them, mended the break. More than ever he realized the wild race ahead of him. He had to stick to the river, fight his way through with this raft, and its burden or abandon it and go on foot overland.

He rested a moment, cut additional thongs from the soaked hides, made ready for emergency repairs.

Tom walked back upstream where he had sighted a pole better suited for a sweep than the one he had. He whirled at the sound of hoofs and the voice of Gable.

"Here's the raft," cried the renegade. "Look at them beaver plews; look at that fur!" There was triumphant gloating in his voice.

The one man with Gable came crashing down the bank with him. Apparently the party had split in an effort to locate the raft, find the rich haul of fur that was lashed to it. And now they had seen the raft from above and were hurrying down to where it was grounded.

Tom Marcy did not stop to think. He leaped as they reached the water's edge. He swung a smooth rock in his hand. It smashed into the head of Gable's companion. Tom saw him tumble into the edge of the stream. Gable turned with a snarl.

IT was like running into a rock to smash into Gable. Tom felt every muscle of his body twang at that first terrific impact.

They grappled, swayed, broke loose, and then crashed again as they both leaped.

Tom Marcy realized that the hour of ordeal had come. It was not as he had anticipated. But this was to be the conflict for which Hawk had trained him. Not only his own life but Hawk's depended on the outcome.

They stumbled into the edge of the river. Gable slipped and fell, clutching. Tom was dragged down. They fought up. Tom caught a glimpse of Gable's unconscious companion. He was lying in the shallows. He slipped into the rushing river as Gable's rock struck him.

Then the two warriors were down again, grappling, fighting up out of the smother of the cold water.

Tom struck again and again. He caught a stone in his hand. Gable reached for his knife. Tom felt the sting of it biting into his shoulder. There was a moment when they were locked so close neither could strike. They broke away and leaped at each other like two wild things. They reached the bank and dry footing. Gable came rushing. Tom gave ground from the knife. His foot touched the raft. Gable lunged.

For a moment they were wrestling on the uneven surface of the logs. Tom felt the raft bobbing under him; know that they had left shore. They staggered up. Gable

gave a quick cry and tried to leap to the shore. But Tom Marcy threw his weight against him and they were both overboard.

IN that instant Tom knew that Gable could not swim. They went under the water, came up puffing and blowing, went under again. Tom felt Gable clutching at him wildly, desperately. He fought him off, tried to hit him. They tore loose from the raft.

Tom felt the sweep pole as it rubbed by him. He caught it and dragged himself to the edge of the raft. Gable was clawing and pulling him down. Tom kicked himself half free and then Gable tangled with his legs again.

The raft was taking on new speed. The walls of the river on either side were dizzy phantom lands as the raft swayed and swirled.

Gable fought free and came to the surface. His hands reached out to Tom Marcy, closed about his neck in a grip that choked the wind from Tom's lungs and made the blood ring in his ears.

Tom tore desperately at those fingers. They had the strength of death fright in them. He could not rip them loose. He smashed at the water drenched beard that was close to his face. He struggled trying to get loose.

His hand felt one of the cross poles he had used to lash the larger logs together. He wrenched at it. It held. He wrenched again. Unconsciousness came near to him. He could feel new strength coming to Gable as he got fresh air into his lungs. The fingers at Tom's throat tightened a little.

With an effort Tom Marcy jerked a length of that pole loose. He twisted it quickly, broke the hold with a trick that he had learned from Hawk and then slashed at Gable's head.

The big renegade sank, came up grasping for a hold. Again Tom struck. And then he reached and clutched as Gable started to plunge out of sight in the crazy churn of the waters.

VII

ROUBIDOU'S had seen many queer pack trains come into the stockade. But none so unusual as stocky Sol Gable bending under the weight of a beaver pack lashed on his shoulders. His hands were tied behind him. He was being prodded from the rear by Tom Marcy. Both were red eyed, unkempt, on the point of collapse.

"Whoa," ordered Tom as they reached a point in front of the doorway. "Stand still now and I'll git this pack off you. Whoa, I said!"

The pack tumbled to the ground.

"Get me loose, here," roared Gable to those around him. "Get me loose and I'll—"

"You stay back," said Tom Marcy to a man who suddenly stepped forward; one of Gable's men. The nose of Tom's big old horse pistol rooted out at the man. He dropped back.

"What brings you in this way?" demanded Roubidou, coming forward.

In quick, short sentences Tom told what had happened and how he had fished Gable, unconscious, out of the river, bound him, and made him stay on the raft as they shot down to the junction of the Colorado and the Uncompahgre. How they traveled on foot up the Uncompahgre after they had cached the winter's catch of furs. He told, too, of the danger that threatened Hawk back there in the hidden valley.

"I want men to go in with me after Hawk," said Tom, turning to the group. "Can I have them?"

"By hoss an' beaver, it's the yonker that fit like a gargajou—" rumbled the voice of a little stocky man who came waddling out of the trade room. Back of him was a lean man who had a fiery, almost maniacal, look in his eye.

"Pony McSpeeden," yelled Tom Marcy. "Why, you old—"

Like blasting powder scattering rock, the group shattered as the man back of Pony McSpeeden came charging. There was a sharp, ghastly cry from Gable. There was an instant in which the only thing moving was that deadly figure that had shoved Pony aside as he charged.

That figure was whipping its arms crazily. And then Roubidou was leaping to pull off this man who had struck at Gable.

But Roubidou and the others were too late. Gable fell, trying to clutch the knife wounds that had slashed into his side in that first quick attack.

"Mather," cried Gable, his eyes glassy. "I thought—"

"You thought you killed me like you killed Sile Marcy," snarled the lean man, who still stood menacingly above Gable. "But I swam ashore after you had clubbed me and thrown me overboard. I saw you kill Marcy, Gable, and I knew you were laying for me that night on the raft. But I fooled you. Then I tracked you. But I lost the trail.

"Finally Pony McSpeeden came to me last fall down near Conejos and told me you were here. But I've found you, I've found you, you murderer, you thief!" he ended with a queer, screechy sort of a cry.

He turned to McSpeeden. His face dull now, some sort of queer lethargy clutching it. He started to cough until it seemed that his whole body would break in the effort. Suddenly he collapsed on the ground.

"TAKE them both in the trading room," ordered Roubidou.

He faced Pony McSpeeden and Tom Marcy.

"How did you find Mather? How did you know what had happened back on the river?" he asked, turning to McSpeeden.

"I left here last fall without comin' back tuh argue with you about knifin' of Hawk, because I wanted to find Mather pronto," explained Pony shortly. "Tom Marcy told me about him suspicionin' Gable of dirty work on that river raft. And I knew that Mather would be able to put the Indian sign on Gable. Nothin' I wanted so much as to hang up Gable's hide.

"But we were snowed out until we came over Cochetopa Pass last week, as you know. And we were plannin' tuh look up Tom Marcy and the Hawk, then corner Gable, make him confess an' make him pay—some way. But Mather's collected in full, I guess.

"He never recovered from that wettin' and the cold followin' it," continued Pony. "I think Mather kept on livin' after he should have been dead just to catch up with Gable. He told me the whole business a number of times. Was just a little loony about it, poor devil. Guess there's no question but that Gable was guilty of the whole dirty business. And now, riggin' up tuh do the same sort of trick on Hawk and Tom here.

"I also found out that Gable was in the habit of going out with some of the Ute parties raidin' the wagons. He'd fill 'em full of likker, egg 'em on to wipin' up on an outfit, an' then take the loot for himself. That fits in with Tom's story, here, of the white man he saw when that train he come in on was jumped."

"He's played his last trick," observed Roubidou. "His gang's sure to bust up now. Part of them are in here now, wonderin' what to do next. I guess we better get you fellows a rig so you can go back in a hurry to pick up Hawk and bring him in here. Then we'll settle up."

IT was two months later before Tom Marcy learned what the trader meant when he mentioned settling up. Hawk and Pony were standing by their horses ready to mount. Tom had shaken hands with his other friends at the fort. The pack train was already jingling out of the compound under the hazing of a Mexican packer. Tom reached out his hand to say good-bye to Roubidou.

"Come inside," said the trader shortly. "I've something here for you."

He put a bundle in Tom's hands.

"What's this?" asked Tom in surprise, as he felt the weight of silver coin in the bag. He could think of nothing that could bring that to him.

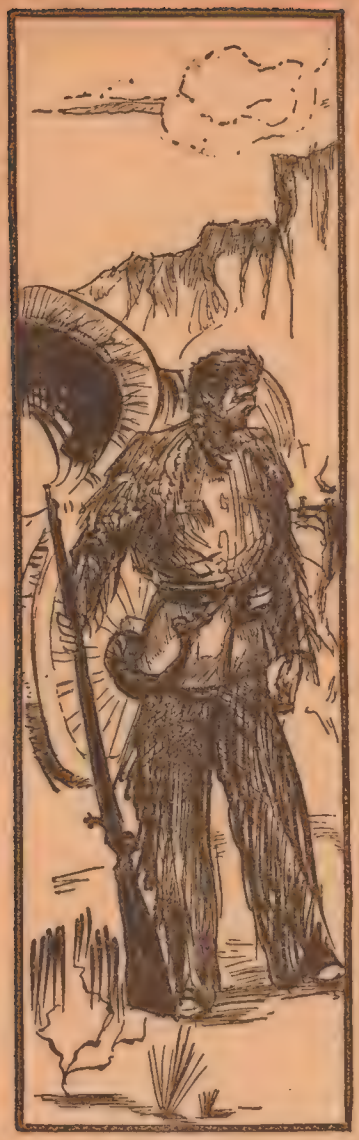
"Gable left that," said Roubidou shortly. "No one to claim it. I reckon it's about what that raft was worth. As I figure, it's just ordinary justice.

"Take it, Tom. That all very nearly settles the account that you come out here to collect.

"An' I'll see you when you come back this way."

Tom Marcy knew the trader had spoken a true word; that he would be back. Pony was going only so far as the Pueblo. Tom and Hawk would travel by horse and river steamer to the old home.

After Hawk had asked a question of Ella Marcy, Tom Marcy knew he would head west again, alone.



Frontier Rifles

By

W. M. ALLISON

The rifles which won the West — the Kentucky flint-lock, the Plains rifle, the Colt revolving rifle and the famed Sharps buffalo gun.

MIGHTY little attention has been paid to the tremendous part which the rifles of the frontier played in the development of the West. In recalling the famous—and infamous—characters of those days much enthusiastic acclaim is given to their ability with the six-gun. . . . But the obvious fact that they must also have been proficient riflemen is all too often ignored.

Of course, the picture of two men, facing each other with blazing six-guns in a dusty cow-town street is more thrilling than one of the same two hunkered down behind whatever cover they could find, sniping at each other with rifles. But one of the outstanding characteristics of the frontiersman was that he was practical; when he had fighting to do, he did it as efficiently as possible, and—usually—with the very least possible danger to himself.

The six-shooter is a wonderful weapon, and under certain conditions is the best of all, in the hands of a man who knows how to handle it. But although most men on the frontier carried belt-guns, it is safe to say that a comparatively small percentage were really expert in their use, while anyone was more or less dangerous with a rifle. And even the best of six-gun men

found plenty of use for the longer range weapon.

The Daltons must have been pretty handy with their belt-guns, but in the narrative by Emmet Dalton, the sole survivor of the fatal Coffeeville (Kansas) raid, one is struck by the fact that these outlaws never at any time seemed to be without their rifles. . . .

The development of the American rifle followed the needs and circumstances of the frontier. So long as that term applied to the timbered country of the East and Middle West, the frontiersman did most of his traveling on his own feet, and his weapons needed to be as simple and economical as possible.

This accounts for the fact that the "Kentucky" rifle was used for a century or more, with practically no change in form; which seems strange to us, in these days of rapid mechanical development. The Kentucky was really misnamed, as it was developed and first made by Pennsylvania rifle makers, and was used up and down the entire border, in nearly all the Colonies outside of New England.

The term, Kentucky, was a general one, however, applied to a vast stretch of the little known country to the Westward rather than the definite boundaries of the present State.

THE Kentucky rifle was of German and Swiss parentage, but it was truly American from butt to muzzle, and was unlike any other weapon in the world.

Guns with grooved, twisting bore—rifles—had been made and used in Central Europe for many years, but were practically unknown in England and the Colonies until the arrival of German and Swiss emigrants, who settled mostly in Pennsylvania. There were gunsmiths among them, and they began to make rifles—of the style they had known in the "Old Country." But these did not suit the woodsman, who had ideas of his own, based on his requirements. The German rifle was of larger caliber, short in the barrel, and not accurate enough.

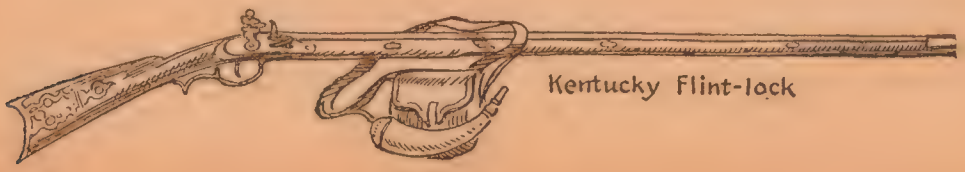
So, by degrees, the Kentucky rifle was developed, but of course it would be impossible to say when it arrived at its definite form. The earliest authentic date on one of these rifles is supposed to be 1728. The outstanding features are the extremely long barrel, and the peculiar slanting stock, usually of curly maple wood, extending the full length of the barrel, with an ornate "patch" box in the butt.

The workmanship on these old guns is a joy to the gun-lover, every detail of construction and ornamentation being carried out with the utmost care. Those old-time rifle makers were master craftsmen, and most important of all, they knew how to make an *accurate* rifle.

They probably knew, as we do today, that a very long barrel is not necessary for accuracy, but they had reasons for making them that way. Since the woodsman had only one shot at his command, he needed every possible advantage and all the distance he could get between sights was a help. Also the long barrel would burn a heavy charge of black powder consistently and give a uniform velocity and flat trajectory to the round ball. That is, it carried up to a good range, without having to make allowance for the drop of the bullet.

Somewhere along the line, the idea of the "patch" came in—the bullet being wrapped in a piece of greased cloth or soft leather before being driven down the barrel. Previously, the bullet had always been cast for a very tight fit, necessitating a metal ram-rod, and a good deal of force, which tended to deform the bullet and injure the rifling at the same time. The patched bullet allowed the use of a wooden ram-rod, was easier to load, and increased the accuracy.

ALL things considered, the Kentucky was probably the nearest approach to an all-round, all-purpose rifle which has ever been in use, and although designed as



Kentucky Flint-lock

a hunting rifle, it was the deadliest weapon of its period, as was proved in the Colonial Wars, the Revolution, and the War of 1812. During all this time the military musket had remained a smooth-bore, short range gun.

The long life of a Kentucky rifle was due to the skill of the numerous gunsmiths. The barrels were rather soft, and would show wear after much use. But they could be re-bored—making them slightly larger in caliber. Then a new bullet mold was made—and rifle and mold were passed on the next generation.

The muzzle loading rifles continued in use in the mountain regions, especially in the South, for many years after they were obsolete elsewhere, and even today there are gunsmiths there who can make those rifles with the crude, but effective tools of the by-gone days.

Some of the Kentuckys were double barreled, at least as early as the Revolution, and it seems strange that this style did not become more general, as they seem to have been equally accurate.

They were not built with the barrels side by side, like the usual double shot gun, but with one barrel over the other, both bored from one piece and designed to revolve, so that one lock served both. Of course, this would increase the weight, which is perhaps the reason they were not more popular.

When the percussion lock came into use, many of the Kentucky flint-locks were altered to the new system. The percussion lock, and all subsequent priming devices were made possible by the experiments of a Scotch parson, by the name of Forsythe, who was dissatisfied with his flint-lock fowling-piece.

Many years after his death he received full credit for his work!

The percussion copper cap came into use in this country about 1816, several inventors claiming priority. Later devices were designed to make the priming automatic, such as the tape-primer, fed by cocking the hammer. This was one of the first steps toward rapid-fire.

The percussion lock was a very important development, being more certain and having faster ignition than the flint-lock, and more weather-proof.

The Kentucky finally passed out as a frontier rifle when the frontier moved Westward, to an entirely different country. St. Louis became the headquarters of the rifle industry—and the Plains rifle came into being.

THE Plains rifle was larger in caliber, because the buffalo, and eventually the grizzly bear had to be reckoned with. It was shorter in the barrel, because the frontiersman had now become a horseman, and the stock became straighter, more like the military type. Adjustable sights began to come into use, because the plainsman had

Plains Rifle
(Percussion)

occasion to shoot at longer ranges. The percussion cap lock was in general use, though some old-timers insisted on flint-lock, not liking the idea of "new-fangled contraptions."

The Plains rifle belongs to that wonderful period of the West before the Civil War. It blazed the way for the Santa Fe Trail, and the road to Oregon and California.

Kit Carson, Jim Bridger and the host of old-time "Mountain Men" come to life again as you handle one of these old guns. One of Kit Carson's rifles used to be—and no doubt still is—in the Colorado State House in Denver. As I recall, it was not very long, but was very large in bore, and looked to be extremely heavy. Kit was a small man, but mighty.

Fine and accurate as these rifles were, however, the muzzle-loader was not ideal for horseback use, and the plainsman really needed a faster working rifle and one that was easier to load.

The Colt revolving rifle was produced in the late '30's. But while it had many good qualities, it had the weakness of the revolving system—air space between the load and the barrel, allowing the escape of gas and power.

This is of no great importance in the revolver, as the limitations of one-hand shooting make it a short range weapon anyway. But the plainsman needed all the

range he could get in his rifle. The Colt revolving rifles were made up to the time

Colt Revolving Rifle

of the Civil War, and no doubt many of them came in very handy in Indian fights. But they did not displace the single-shot muzzle-loader as the plainsman's weapon.

The idea of loading a gun at the breech came in early. John Hall patented a breech-loading flint-lock rifle in 1811, and a few years later succeeded in getting the U. S. Government interested in it. A good many of the Hall rifles were made at the Harpers Ferry plant, some as late as 1840, the later ones with percussion locks. They were used in the various Indian Wars and the Mexican War.

This rifle was simple in operation; a section of the breech tipped up for loading with powder and bullet, then was replaced. But it had the same weakness of the later Colt revolving rifles, that is, air space between load and barrel. The principle was not sound, and there seems to be no record of the general use of these rifles.

A REALLY successful breech loader did not appear until Christian Sharps patented the famous rifle bearing his name, in 1848. The early models were not as successful as later ones, because the metallic cartridge was still a thing of the future. But the action was strong enough to handle the extremely heavy loads which were to come later on.

The trigger guard was used as a lever to operate the breech-block, which worked vertically behind the barrel. The bullet and powder were continued in a cartridge of linen or paper, the end of which was sheared off by the closing breech-block, exposing the powder to the action of a percussion cap, or priming tape which was used on most of them. But it was not possible to seal the breech entirely, and there was still some escape of gas. This problem was not solved until the development of the metallic cartridge, with a thin copper shell which would expand with the explosion, cutting off the leakage of gas at the breech.

But these early Sharps rifles soon began to make history. The Civil War was not far away. The Eastern part of Kansas was partially settled, and a bitter struggle was on to determine whether the new Territory would become a Free or a Slave State. For about seven years an intermittent state of guerrilla warfare was in existence, giving the Territory the name of "Bloody Kansas."

Many of the Free-State partisans were armed with the new Sharps rifles, sent in by their backers in the East, and these "John Brown rifles" probably had quite a bit to do with the final result. Otherwise, the Abolitionist crusaders had the cards somewhat stacked against them, the Missourians having control of such legal machinery as there was, and the backing of the Federal Government at that time. (At least, that is what we were taught in Kansas, when I was a youngster.)

The Civil War period was naturally an active one for arms manufacturers. The majority of the troops were armed with muzzle-loaders. But there were at least twenty different makes of breech-loaders —single shot and repeating—in use by the Northern forces. Many of them were furnished by the different States for use of their troops, and some "independent" organizations bought their own arms. Most of these breech-loaders were carbines for cavalry use, though many are still in existence in full length "musket" form.

THE Sharps, of course, came in for their share of use—in fact, there were more of them than any other breech-loader except the Spencer repeater.

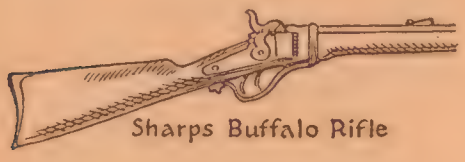
It has been claimed that the word "Sharpshooter" originated from the use of the Sharps rifle. This seems rather doubtful, as the muzzle-loader was still the more accurate, and was used for target shooting as late as the seventies. However, Colonel Berdan's regiment of crack riflemen were, for a while at least, armed with the Sharps, so the story may be true.

At the end of the war many Sharps percussion rifles were altered to use metallic cartridges, and from then on the new rifles were made for that purpose, beginning the greatest period of these arms.

Ex-soldiers of both armies were swarming into the West. The railroad began to reach out into the plains, and Texas cattle started up the trail to meet it in Kansas. The plains tribes were up in arms to halt the encroachments into their hunting grounds, and the Army was re-organized to give some measure of protection to the fast spreading settlements.

It was a wonderful era, but a wild one, and the arms makers met the conditions of the frontier. Development of the metallic cartridge made it possible to use loads of greater power and range than ever before. But for several years the heavy loads were limited to the single-shot rifles, as the repeaters of that time could not handle them.

The Sharps, with the strongest of all actions, became the most popular, especially for buffalo hunting. Some of those old buffalo guns weighed as much as eighteen pounds, with calibers from .40 to .50, using bullets up to 550 grains in weight. It took a lot of black powder to drive one of



Sharps Buffalo Rifle

those heavy slugs, and the rifle needed to be heavy. Some of these cartridges cost as much as twenty-five cents apiece at frontier prices.

But each was supposed to get a buffalo.

The Indians did their buffalo killing from horseback, at short range, and Army officers and others who hunted for sport did the same, using repeating rifles or revolvers. But the professional hide-hunter did his shooting on foot from as long range as possible, so the noise would not stampede the herd. He would drop as many animals as he could, then the skinning crew would come up from behind with the wagons.

For a few years, hide-hunting was a lucrative occupation, and the vast herds of buffalo were exterminated.

Other rifles were made for the heavy cartridges, and used also for buffalo. But the Sharps was the favorite. These buffalo guns were terrible weapons, also. The Indian trick of hanging down behind his pony while circling the enemy was not very effective against a buffalo hunter, whose rifle was likely to shoot clear through the pony.

SHARPS rifles were also made in lighter weight, suitable for horseback use, and in "Creedmore" Target models. (The Creedmore rifle range, on Long Island, was then the favorite target range, as Camp Perry, Ohio, is today.)

The Sharps-Borchardt was a different action, hammerless. It was a fine rifle, made in the heavy calibers, but never acquired anything like the vogue of the older "hammer" type.

In spite of its great popularity, the Sharps rifle was always manufactured under difficulties which included lawsuits and re-organizations. The factory was moved at one time, and some lots were made under contract at other plants. Collectors have a difficult time tracing the exact history of some models.

The single-shot rifles finally faded out on the frontier, as the Winchester repeater was developed to the point of handling the more powerful cartridges. The Sharps was discontinued in 1881, but it had played a great part in Western history and well deserved the reputation which it holds today.

The Sharps patents were bought in by the Winchester Company, who later began the manufacture of the Winchester Single-Shot rifle—a modified and considerably refined form of the Sharps. This rifle has been made in practically all calibers, but while it was used to a certain extent for hunting purposes, it is best known as a target rifle, sharing honors with the Ballard in the days when the "Schuetzen" matches were in vogue.

It may not be out of order to mention that the Schuetzen target game developed off-hand rifle shooting, at medium ranges, to the highest point ever known. The rifles, however, were built expressly for this purpose—heavy, with palm-rests, eccentric stocks, etc., and had no possible place except on the target-range.

Today, organized target shooting follows the military system, using the off-hand, kneeling and prone positions. And except for special built-to-order guns, on Winchester single-shot and Ballard actions,

military style rifles are used, even in .22 caliber.

THE Ballard rifle was patented in 1860, and like the other breech-loaders, got into the Civil War to a certain extent. Since it was always a cartridge rifle, it had a lighter and faster hammer than the Sharps, which always retained the original heavy, outside hammer.

Many expert riflemen consider the Ballard to be the best single-shot action ever built, in its manner of seating and supporting the cartridge. For this reason it is probably best known as a target rifle, but it had an excellent frontier record. Both

"Pacific" Ballard

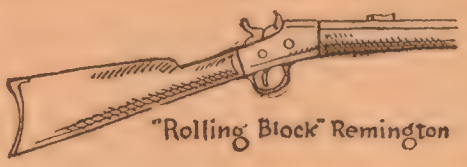
the "Pacific" and "Montana" models were heavy guns, built for powerful loads.

Although the Ballard was discontinued about forty years ago, it is still very much alive. The country has been searched for these old guns, they have been re-stocked and fitted with Pope, Peterson and Neidner barrels, and are used in all the small-bore target matches.

The name Remington is one of the best known in rifle history. The original founder of these famous arms began the manufacture of muzzle-loading rifles in 1816, and his sons were among the first to carry on this business in a big way. In the early '60's they produced a breech-loading rifle, and by the end of the Civil War had developed the "rolling-block" action which became known all over the world.

This was probably the simplest, and one of the strongest of all breech-loaders, which accounts for the fact that more than a million and a half of them were made for military use. Nearly every country in Europe, as well as Latin America used the Remington at one time or another. In this country they were adopted by the Navy, and by some of the States for National Guard service.

For frontier use, the Remington was made for practically all the cartridges of the time, and were fine, accurate rifles, very trim in outline. The rolling-block action did not have the leverage of the Sharps or Ballard for extracting empty shells, but it


"Rolling Block" Remington

was so simple and fool-proof that it was almost impossible to get out of order.

The Remington-Hepburn was a different action, with a falling breech-block, operated by a side lever. It ranked with the best of the breech-loaders, but was never in as much demand as the older model.

MOST of the Civil War breech-loaders did not survive the conflict, and while many of them were probably in use afterward, they did not leave their mark on frontier history. It was in the interest of economy that the U. S. Government produced still another single-shot rifle.

At the close of the war a great quantity of muzzle-loading Springfields were on hand, and plans were at once made to alter them into breech-loaders. The first efforts were not very successful, but the system was improved, and in 1873 new rifles were made on the same design, both infantry muskets and cavalry carbines.

The altered guns were .50 caliber, but the new ones were made for the .45-70, one of the best and most effective of the big black-powder cartridges.

The Springfield was the only one of the big caliber single-shots which ever came into my personal experience, as at one time I served in a National Guard outfit that was still armed with the old-timer. The one issued to me was rather cranky about ejecting empty shells, and had a kick which seemed positively malicious. If a "rookie," shooting one of these guns for the first time, held it too loosely, it would jump up and kick him in the face. This was one gun I never loved—but I was barely eighteen, and decidedly a lightweight.

The old Springfield must be given full credit for its service on the frontier. It was an accurate, terribly effective weapon, and was the Army rifle in the days that saw the plains tribes subdued and a new era come into the West. Although strictly a military arm, it made a perfectly good

buffalo gun, as proved by the fact that Colonel Cody ("Buffalo Bill") is supposed to have used it in earning his nick-name.

The last Indian service of the Springfield was in the Sioux uprising in 1890, which ended with the death of Sitting Bull and the Battle of Wounded Knee. This is now a forgotten story, but according to the memoirs of Gen. Nelson A. Miles an Indian War of gigantic proportions was narrowly averted.

The beginning of the trouble had a religious basis, the Indians believing that the long-looked-for Messiah had arrived. The buffalo would return, and warriors long dead would rise from the grave to help drive the white race from the Red man's country. It seems fantastic, but the Indians believed it, and the Ghost Dance and other ceremonies were driving them into a frenzy.

Nearly all the tribes were affected, but the Sioux, always the most war-like, went into action prematurely, large bands withdrawing from the reservations into the South Dakota Badlands. The War Department acted promptly, using nearly all available troops in the country, and the hostiles were isolated with only the one battle resulting.

General Miles' personal acquaintance and influence with the other chiefs of other tribes averted a general uprising. The last dream of the Indian had faded.

Frederick Remington, the greatest of all artists who ever portrayed the West, was with the troops in the field, and in his book *Pony Tracks* he tells several vivid episodes of this short but exciting campaign.

THE Army adopted the Krag-Jorgensen rifle in the early '90's. But there were not enough of them to arm all the volunteer troops in the Spanish-American War, so the old Springfields were recalled into service, and some of them went to the Philippines.

The Krag was a bolt-action repeater of the small-bore, high-velocity smokeless type which has since come into general use. It was displaced in 1903 by the New Springfield, a rifle built on the German Mauser system, which is still the U. S. Service arm.

The repeating rifle is practically the same age as the single-shot breech-loader, but for several years it was handicapped by being unable to handle as effective loads as the more simple arm.

The Spencer was not the first repeater, being patented in 1860, but it was the first to be used in any large quantities. There were more Spencers used by the Northern forces in the Civil War than any other breech-loading rifle. In fact, the Government bought them as fast as they could be manufactured. Most of them were carbines and they were considered the best cavalry weapons of the time. By the close of the War, and for a time afterward, they seem to have been the standard arm of that branch of the Service, and came in for a good deal of Indian fighting.

The Spencer was a seven-shot repeater, with the magazine in the butt, operated by the trigger guard as a lever, and shooting

Spencer Repeater

a short rim-fire cartridge of .50 and .52 caliber. It was a good, reliable gun, though it had no great range, and its career was short.

In 1866 it was put on the market for civilian use, and for a short time seems to have been popular in the West. But it was discontinued in 1869, and the plant sold to the Winchester people. The cavalry had already turned to the single-shot Sharps and Springfield carbines. But there must have been a good many Spencers remaining in use, because the ammunition makers continued to list cartridges for them for a good many years.

For several years the cavalry seemed to have been variously armed. There was a controversy, a few years ago, in the pages of one of the sportsman's magazines, as to the carbines carried by Custer's command in the tragic battle of the Little Big Horn. A few old soldiers who had been in the 7th Cavalry at that time were located and interviewed, but they disagreed, and a search of Army records showed that a cavalry regiment at that time (1876) might have been armed with the .50 caliber Sharps (altered from percussion), the altered Springfield of some

caliber, or the '73 model Springfield, .45-70.

It might seem strange that the old soldiers should be hazy about such details. But the fact is that the average soldier is not a "gun-crank" and often knows no more about his gun than he absolutely has to—that is, the method of operation.

In proof of this, many of our veterans of the World War have the idea that the rifle they carried in France was a ".30-30." Of course, the Springfield and the Army Model '17 (Enfield) are .30 caliber, but they use an entirely different cartridge than the .30-30, which was never used in a military rifle.

THE lever-action Winchester, which was destined to come into almost universal use in the West, was the result of evolution. One of the earliest efforts toward a repeating rifle was a clumsy affair called the Jennings, with a tube magazine under the barrel which was continued in the later guns.

Since the metallic cartridge had not come into existence, a rather ingenious make-shift was used, consisting of a hollow-base bullet which contained the powder charge and was fired by a percussion tape primer. Later, a primer was incorporated with the loaded bullet.

Smith & Wesson owned the patents, and for a while manufactured these rifles and a pistol built on the same system, but sold them to devote all their attention to the manufacture of revolvers.

The new owners continued the production of the repeating rifle and pistol under the name of "Volcanic." An expert mechanic by the name of Tyler Henry had been identified with all these developments, and had done a great deal toward the improvements in fixed ammunition. And when the metallic cartridge was finally evolved, his name was given to an improved new rifle, which soon earned a great deal of popularity.

The Henry was used to quite an extent in the Civil War, although it was made only in sporting models, and was used mostly by State and independent organizations. It was a twelve-shot repeater, and there is an often-told story of the Confederate soldier who complained bitterly about "that plagued Yankee rifle that can be loaded Sunday and fired all the week."

And the Indians were amazed at the "Spirit gun" that always seemed to be loaded.

OLIVER WINCHESTER, at one time Lieut.-Governor of Connecticut, had been a stockholder in the Volcanic Company, and was president of the New Haven Arms Co., which manufactured the Henry rifle. In 1866 this was reorganized under the name of the Winchester Repeating Arms Co., and a new rifle put out under that name.

There were slight improvements.

It was much like the Henry, however, using the same type of .44 rim-fire ammunition, and was generally called by the old name. If any of you have ever wondered, as I used to, why Winchester rim-fire ammunition has always been stamped with an H, the answer is that it stands for Henry.

The Winchester Company established the custom, kept up until recent years, of naming each rifle for the year in which it was introduced. The 1873 Model made a long step toward the eventual dominance of the Winchester as the rifle of the West. This rifle used the famous "forty-four-forty," which it has been claimed killed more game and Indians than all other cartridges of its period.

This seems rather an extravagant statement; the .44-40 was a center-fire cartridge, with a somewhat heavier powder charge than the previous .44 rim-fire, and its 200 grain, flat-pointed bullet has always proved a fairly effective killer. It is one of the most powerful loads that can be used in a six shooter, but did not compare with some of the cartridges which were used in the single-shot rifles. Personally, I would much rather have a .40-90 Sharps or Ballard.

The single-shots were not so slow, if ammunition was kept handy. In a pinch the old-timers are said to have held extra cartridegs between the fingers of the left hand, and in the teeth.

In a letter written by General Custer, while on an expedition to the Yellowstone in June, 1873, he says:

Poor Fred and Tom! They have accompanied me frequently—Fred always along—and yet neither of them has been able thus far to kill a

single antelope. I tease them a great deal, for they use the Winchester rifle. It is remarkably accurate up to one hundred yards, and not so beyond that distance.

(Captain Tom Custer, a younger brother, also lost his life on the Little Big Horn, three years later.)

THE Winchesters referred to here, however, are doubtless the '66 model, as the new '73 rifle could hardly have found its way to the extreme frontier the same year. In the same letter, General Custer mentions the fact that he used a Springfield, himself.

But there is no denying that the '73 Winchester did come into most extensive use in the West, especially with cowboys

Lever-Action Winchester

and peace officers. It was fast, reliable, and handy as a saddle gun. And the fact that Colt and Smith & Wesson revolvers were made for the same cartridge was often an important item. That made a fighting combination that has never been beaten by anything except a modern machine gun.

The Winchester Company was not idle, and the Model of 1876 was a heavier, a stronger gun, capable of handling more powerful loads, up to .50 caliber. Except for the Army Springfield, the single-shot rifles now began to fade out on the frontier.

In a model of 1879 the Winchester branched off at a new angle with the Hotchkiss, a bolt-action rifle. But it did not meet with the expected success and was soon abandoned. The model of 1886 was another lever-action, much better than any of the earlier ones, and made for the best cartridges of the time.

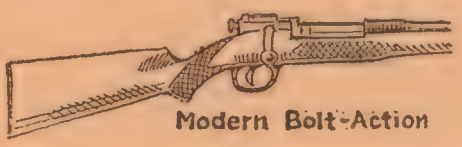
In 1892 a lightweight model was produced, using the same cartridges which had been used in the famous '73 model—.44-40, .38-40 and .32-20.

In Eastern fiction nowadays, when the Winchester is mentioned it is usually a "thirty-thirty." That is all right enough, provided the date fits, but it should be kept in mind that the .30-30 did not make its appearance until 1894. But it did soon become the most popular of all rifle cartridges and its use spread all over the West. Even today, you will probably find more rifles of this caliber in use than any other. (Except, of course, the .22.)

The .30-30 was the first of the new style of smokeless, small-bore, high-velocity rifles to come into use. It made an ideal saddle-gun for the cowboy, being light in weight, with much less recoil than the big caliber, black-powder guns, yet with longer practical range and flatter trajectory.

Compared with the more modern cartridges, the .30-30 is not considered quite powerful enough for anything larger than deer. But much of the biggest game in the country has been killed with it.

The lever-action Winchester was the last frontier rifle, and like the others it fitted the time and the conditions under which it was used. It was not a military arm, nor was it ever intended to be a target rifle. The more modern bolt-action



Modern Bolt-Action

is simpler, stronger and somewhat more accurate. But the lever-action is faster and much handier to carry in a saddle scabbard. In fact, it is a better horseman's rifle.

The present trend of ammunition is toward more and more velocity—cartridges that can only be successfully handled by the bolt-action. But the hunting rifle no longer has to be considered as a weapon. It is a highly specialized affair for the particular game to be sought. Big game is scarce, and a very expensive hunting trip may be rewarded by only a few chances, so the hunter needs a rifle that will reach out and kill the game at the longest possible range.

Our rifles have traveled quite a long way since the Kentucky, the Sharps, and even the earlier Winchester. But many of us would be glad to go back to the old guns if we could only find another frontier.

"TALK SMOKE, FRIEND!"

By J. E. GRINSTEAD

In those days Tascosa was the wildest layout in the Panhandle, and John Maroney was just another stove-up saddle-bum. But when the range buzzards broke loose Maroney showed Tascosa what his Colts' guns could do.

JOHN MARONEY'S horse reeled along the trail, running down wind, ahead of a biting blizzard that swept across Western Kansas, No-Man's Land, and on into the Texas Panhandle. None might guess where John had come from, or why. Behind him lay miles of open prairie and no people. Somewhere in front of him was Tascosa, the wildest town that the Panhandle ever knew.

John was what would be called a bad hombre. Back in the hills of Tennessee, in his early youth, the gray-beards had shaken their heads and said: "John will come to some bad end; he packs a pistol."

That bad end was now apparent—death in a blizzard, which had struck after the first wildflowers bloomed. In that howling wind and driving sleet and snow, John Maroney would have dismounted and tried to walk for warmth, but he felt that once on the ground, he could never regain his saddle. His feet hung dead in his stirrups, and besides that, horses have a sixth sense. Perhaps his horse was going somewhere to shelter.

Maroney's long mustache was a block of ice, and rime was on his eyebrows. He tried to curse and the demon of the storm snatched the oath from his lips and tore it in shreds.

There was no trail. John's horse reeled on across the prairie. It gave a low whinny and its pace quickened.

Dimly, through his frosted lashes and the driving sleet, Maroney saw two red, wavering lights ahead of him. With the back of a numb hand, he rubbed the rime from his eyes and peered into the night. There they were, two red tongues of flame sticking up out of the prairie, wavering, bending, and dancing in the wind.

He knew what it was. He had been famished for water, and in his delirium had seen springs and pools of water where there were only parching sands. He had reached the end and his tortured mind now saw fire, where there was only sleet and snow, and biting, screaming wind reeling across the trackless prairie.

"AMON," said Mrs. Amon Felger, "what is that noise?"

"Only the wind," growled Felger, drowsily, as he sat before the roaring fire in his dugout.

"No, it isn't. It is someone calling. See who it is."

Amon opened the door in the south end of the dugout. The draft sucked down the short chimney, and filled the place with smoke. Felger fought his way out and found John Maroney, sitting on his horse, unwilling to dismount for fear he only dreamed of fire.

"It's a man on a horse, and dang nigh froze to death, Kate," Felger called back to his wife. "I'll take him down to the shack."

John Maroney was in the first stages of death from cold and fatigue. He was drowsy, almost asleep. He heard the whine of a fiddle. The graybeards had told him that fiddlers went to hell.

A door opened and through his half-closed eyes John saw smoke and flame and sparks as they sucked down another short chimney and were drawn toward the door by the screeching wind outside. Yes, this was hell. He had seen the furnace door open twice, and now the imps were carrying him in.

"Huh! Two-gun man," said one of Amon Felger's cowhands, as they laid John Maroney on a bunk in the big dugout, which served for a bunkhouse for the men.

"Two guns or not, he's a human," said Felger. "Throw a shot of whiskey into him, then strip him, rub him with snow, and roll him in blankets."

John Maroney lay swathed in blankets, after being rubbed with snow and dried off. The whiskey had gone to the ends of his fingers and toes. He was warm and comfortable, but his eyes wouldn't stay open. He was dead.

"Had to come to hell to get warm," he muttered and chuckled in his half-delirium.

Down the hill from the other dugout came Kate Felger. The wind was tearing at the old nubia that was wrapped about her head. In one hand she carried a steaming kettle of water, and in the other a stewpan, with the makings of a broth in it.

"Better give him another shot of whiskey," said Felger.

"Yes, and kill him," snapped Kate. "Pull some coals out there, and let me heat this broth. Ain't you got no more sense than to slosh a tubful of whiskey into an empty stummick?"

A few minutes later, Kate sat on the side of the bunk, with the steaming stewpan in one hand and a spoon in the other.

"Raise him up and put some pillows under his head," she ordered. "That'll do," and then she ladled the steaming broth into John Maroney's mouth.

He swallowed a few spoonfuls and the broth seemed to touch some hidden spring. He opened his eyes, forgot to swallow, and the broth ran out the corners of his mouth.

What were angels doing in hell? he wondered. This one was a bit wrinkled and her hair was gray, but she was an angel. No doubt of it. He was too tired to wonder any more. He closed his eyes and went on swallowing broth until they laid him down.

JOHN MARONEY was only half conscious and what followed was more the stillness of exhaustion than sleep. Consciousness came and went in waves.

Once he heard snoring and mused that men slept soundly in hell. It couldn't be so bad. Again, he heard low voices and opened his eyes. His two guns were hanging just above him on a peg.

Dim light was dancing in the room and two immense shadows showed on the rough rafters and roof of the dugout. They were the shadows of two men who were crouching in chairs over the fire, talking in low tones. Maroney listened though he didn't realize it.

"Just six of us left with the old A F Bar," growled old Cash Bynum, the oldest, grayest, and grimmest of Amon Felger's men.

"That's all," replied Crip Bonner, an old-looking, middle-aged rider, who got his nickname from a knee that was stiff from a bullet wound. "I reck'n us six will stay with Old Man Amon until it's over."

"Shore we'll stay," grunted Bynum. "Damn a quitter, anyway. Them fellows were strong for Amon Felger, as long as they could draw pay, eat plenty, and do light work, but when it comes to—"

"Don't be too hard on 'em, Cash. Most of 'em was young fellows. They got kinfolks, sweethearts, mebbe, back somewhere, that they ain't forgot, and they ain't smoked and seasoned like you and me."

"Smoked and seasoned, hell! They're too green to burn. They come out here rearing to be cowpokes. They learn to ride and rope a little, and think that's all they are to it. First time a little rough stuff comes up, they rise and fly like a passel of skeered pa'tridges."

"Cash, this ain't no little rough stuff, and you know it," said Crip. "Jim and Bob Halsey are bad hombres, and they got a gang of bad ones working for 'em. Of course, they're on the steal, but they ain't the only ones.

"I ain't blaming Old Man Amon for getting sore when he caught 'em burning some of his cows, but Amon got right out in the open and raw as a wire-cut braunk. If he'd called Jim and Bob anywhere else except in the Gray Wolf saloon, they might paid him for the cows and let it pass, but—"

"Aw hell, Crip! This plains country has done got past them old days, when it was proper and polite for a cowman to steal his neighbor's stuff if he could get away with it. First place, they ain't hardly no cowhands that'll stick to their boss and eat smoke for him when he goes to take his stuff away from a thief. Look at what Felger's hands done, when this little mess comes up."

"I keep tellin' you it ain't no little mess, Cash. Jim and Bob Halsey give it out, right there in the Gray Wolf, that they was ranching in this country when Amon Felger come here, and they'd still be ranching here when he was gone. Then they said the Panhandle was too narrow for the two outfits and they didn't aim to leave."

"I know what they said," growled Cash. "I heard it, and if Amon Felger had let me alone, Jim and Bob would be punchin' cows in hell right now. But Amon says no. All he wants is his stuff. He aims to settle it peaceable. Peaceable, hell! Them two fellers won't be peaceable until they're dead."

"It looks thataway, Cash, but I can see Amon's point. He's been in here ten year, and has always kept out of trouble, and—"

"Yes, he's kept out of trouble by letting Jim and Bob Halsey and some more steal a few thousand steers from him. If Amon would take my advice just one time, he'd make every damn rustler in the Panhandle turn sick to the stummick when he looked an A F Bar cow in the face."

"Well," said Crip, "it's too late to talk about that now. They ain't only but six of us left, and Amon can't sign on no new hands now. Men that wants to fight joins the army.

"As I says, Jim and Bob is both bad. They got about twenty men and they are all bad. Tate Mangus, Curly Jobes, and half a dozen more of 'em are strictly on the kill, and they shoot a man just as quick from the north side as they would from the south side. A man's back makes a better target for them kind."

"Huh! You ain't mentioned the worst one they got. They brang him in since this mess started. I haven't seen him, but they tell me he packs double hardware and kills 'em to see 'em kick."

"Yes, I've heard of him, too. Calls himself Steve Leaman."

JOHN MARONEY'S bunk squeaked. They looked around, and the stranger was sitting up in bed, staring at them.

"What—is it, pardner?" asked Crip. "Want something?"

"N—no, I reck'n not. I woke up. Is it about morning?"

"No. We ain't never been to bed yet. Just waiting for you to get settled. Feel all right now?"

"Yes, thank you. I'm all right."

John Maroney settled back into his blankets. Cash covered the fire with ashes, and a few minutes later silence was over the A F Bar bunkhouse but for a medley of snoring.

Up at the other dugout, which was the home of Amon Felger and his good wife, Kate, the childless couple sat by the fire and listened to the fitful blizzard blowing itself to death.

It was long past bedtime for this frugal couple, but they were not sleepy. The advent of John Maroney had broken in upon their discussion of an unpleasant subject, and they were loath to go back to it, though no decision had been reached.

"Never seen such a blizzard this late

in the spring," said Felger. "Grass would been good enough to work cattle on in another week."

"Yes, I reck'n it would," replied Kate, "but according to what you was saying when that poor fellow yelled, you didn't aim to work any cattle."

"Well, Kate, I don't know what to do. I don't want to have bad trouble with the Halsey boys. 'Sides that, I've got only six men left and nobody wants to sign on with an outfit that's in trouble like we are. Mebbe it would be best to sell the cattle and go away from here, then just hold the land until the country gets civilized."

"Huh! If this country ain't civilized, I reck'n I was borned where it weren't civilized. There's no cow country any account where it is civilized. The only way a man can get let alone is to make folks afraid to pester him. If he's afraid—"

"Now, don't say that, Kate. You know I'm not afraid of the Halsey boys."

"No, you ain't afraid of them. What you are afraid of is that you'll vi'late some of the Quaker teachin' you got when you was a boy. A religion like that may be fine in Pennsylvania, but it ain't no account in the Panhandle if you want to live and do well. Some people you can turn the other cheek to, but them Halsey boys ain't that kind.

"I ain't afraid to stay here. If you don't want to take orders from the Halsey outfit, don't sell your cattle and run on my account."

"Listen at that wind," said Felger to avoid a direct reply.

"Yes, I hear it," said Kate, grimly. "It's an ill wind that blows nobody good. Mebbe this one has blew us some good."

"I don't see what it could be."

"Well, you're needing some hands the worst way. Maybe that chap the wind blows in here is looking for work."

"Why, Kate! That fellow is a two-gun man. When they pack double hardware, they're on the kill. You know how people look on them kind."

"Well, you told me the Halsey boys had brang on a two-gun killer. I don't see why you ain't got as good a right to have a man in the king row as them."

"Well, Kate, a man ought to know better than to argue with a woman—especially when he knows she's right. You have done more than I have to make the A F Bar what it is. You've done your share of the work, and besides that, you've kept me from quitting when grass was short and water scarce. You've kept me from quitting again. I wanted to stay here and have it out with the Halseys all the time, but I wanted to be sure I was right."

Kate Felger never ruined an argument by talking too much. She made no reply.

Amon picked up the shovel and began covering the fire.

The die had been cast very quietly. As Kate had said, there was nothing on earth that Amon was afraid of except his conscience. He had convinced that conscience that he was right and now, without any heroics, and short-handed as he was, Felger was going to fight it out with the Halseys.

CAME morning. The storm had blown itself to death and the sun was shining brightly.

After breakfast, Amon Felger went down to the bunkhouse. The other men were out looking after the saddle stock.

John Maroney had eaten breakfast with the men, and seemed to be as good as new. He was sitting by the fire, smoking. His horse, which was a little drawn from its battle with the blizzard, but had spent the remainder of the night on the south side of the hay-rack, stood saddled and ready for the trail.

"Good morning," greeted John Maroney, rising, his two guns swinging at his sides. "You are Mr. Felger?"

"Yes, that's my name."

"John Maroney is mine. I was just waiting to thank you for taking me in and saving my life. I—"

"That's all right," said Felger. "I'd do that for anybody and I reck'n you would."

"It was mighty fine of you, just the same. I'd like to work for such a man as you. Do you need a hand?"

"Why, I— Where are you from?"

"That blizzard blew me in from north of here," and Maroney smiled.

Amon Felger looked him up and down. He was a youngish chap. Twenty-five, maybe. Clean, frank, open face, rather good looking, five foot nine or so, close knit and wiry.

"Always ride with two guns?" asked Felger.

"Yes. I lose my balance if I take one off."

"Hum. I need a hand. I want to be fair with you. I'm in a war, and—"

"When you was a boy, did you ever trade knives, sight unseen?" smiled Maroney.

"Yes."

"I'm willing to trade that way if you are."

This barred Felger from asking more questions. He thought of Kate's quaint remark about "a man in the king row," and John Maroney became a puncher for the A F Bar.

There was no use of prolonging the agony. It was only five miles to Tascosa. Felger had kept his men away from there the past week. He knew people would say he was afraid of the Halseys. He knew his men were chafing under the restraint.

Pretty soon they would begin to work cattle. Until that time came, they had a right to go to town, take a few drinks, and play a little poker. So they saddled and rode, John Maroney with the rest.

As they passed the home dugout, Kate Felger, the gray-haired angel of Maroney's dream, was standing in the door. He raised his hat to her and rode on.

"Ever been in Tascosa?" asked Crip, who was riding with Maroney.

"No," said John.

"It's right rough and unlady-like."

"Is that so!" There was a feigned alarm in John Maroney's voice, and a little glint of mischief in his eyes. "Maybe I'd better run back home and wait until you menfolks return. Would they be rude to a stranger?"

"I reck'n not," replied Crip, and shut up like a spring gate. This bird had two guns and Crip had only one. Why should he warn him of what was likely to happen to him, since he was an A F Bar puncher. Let him take his medicine.

II

THE Halsey ranch, known as the Circle H, was about six miles west of Tascosa; the A F Bar was five miles east of the wild old town.

Bob Halsey, Tate Mangus, Curly Jobes and a dozen other Circle H men had ridden into town early that morning. They had taken a few drinks, and the boys were scattered about the Gray Wolf, some playing poker, some spending their money sweating the game.

Tate, Curly, and three others were still at the bar, with Bob Halsey. Jim Halsey and their new killer, Leaman, with several others of the Circle H outfit, were not in town.

Bob was leaning on the bar, talking to Charlie Kelson, the owner of the Gray Wolf. Charlie was playing in with the Halseys just as a matter of business, because he couldn't see a chance for Felger to win the war but he had nothing against Amon Felger.

Charlie Kelson was a game fighter himself, and his word was good when he gave it. He had put plenty of people straight on wild tales they told of happenings in the Gray Wolf in the hectic days when Tascosa, was in her pristine glory.

"Charlie," said Bob Halsey, "Jim and me has talked it all over and we decided that the only thing for us to do is to run Felger's outfit clean off the face of the earth. We didn't want trouble, but Amon jumps us raw, right here in the Wolf. Jim makes a talk that he's got to back up, or be laughed at. Felger's got no men left, and—"

"He's got Cash Bynum and Crip," replied Charlie, "and he's got four more plumb good ones. Besides that, Felger himself ain't afraid like you think he is."

"Pooh. They're so skeered they won't come to town. An old woman could run that outfit out of town if they came."

"Think so? You better go hunt her up, and get her on the job," and Charlie jerked his head toward the door.

BOB HALSEY whirled and faced Amon Felger. Amon was leading his men. There have been a hundred wild tales about what happened in the Gray Wolf that morning. About the first fight in one of the worst range wars that ever happened in the Panhandle country.

Charlie Kelson was a cool-headed hombre, and gunfights were all in the day's work with him. His version is perhaps nearer true than any of them.

Felger and his men came on to the bar, and Amon Felger said:

"Hello, Bob! You fellows take one with us."

"No!" growled Bob. "I'm drinking with my own men."

Bob Halsey gave down the bar, with Tate, Curly, and three others to his left. That left plenty of room to Bob's right for Felger and his men. Felger stood almost touching Bob Halsey. To Felger's right were Cash, Crip, Babe Lewis, Monty Spights, Dave Elgin, Keno Huff, and a youngster who was a stranger to Charlie.

That stranger was John Maroney. From behind the bar, Charlie couldn't see the guns of John Maroney, so he sized John up as some stranger that Felger had picked up to take a drink with him. Charlie smiled inside as he thought this stranger was wise to be near the door, as he could go out when the fireworks began. There was the whole A F Bar outfit, and Bob Halsey had enough men with him to eat them.

Felger and his men took their drinks, and then Bob Halsey turned to Amon and said:

"You fellows have had yo' drink and now you better run along. Charlie don't want the Wolf all messed up."

"What do you mean messed up?" asked Amon.

"Aw hell, Amon. You know what I mean. Jim has done told you they ain't enough room in the Panhandle for our two outfits, and—"

"I ain't stopping you and Jim from moving if you want to," retorted Felger. "There'd still be plenty of rustlers left."

Charlie Kelson said he never did see John Maroney leave the front end of the bar. He just saw him standing about four feet beyond Bob and Amon, with his thumbs hooked in his belt above those two guns. Bob came back at Amon with a fighting word, and hard, lean old Amon Felger struck Bob in the face with his fist.

AFTER that, the Gray Wolf was a volcano for a few moments. The Circle H men rallied to Bob. In all, he had fourteen men, besides himself. Guns began to roar. High above the crash and clamor, the voice of John Maroney rang clear as a trumpet.

"Get out of here quick, damn you!"

John Maroney was standing in the middle of the floor, and his guns were belching lead and flame toward the open door where the Circle H men were making the best of the way out.

That battle had been rather to the swift than to the strong. Of the thousands of bullets in the dobe walls of the Gray Wolf, no one man had ever fired so many in so short a time as John Maroney fired in that fight; yet, when the smoke cleared away, his guns were reloaded and hanging in their holsters, while he stood smiling at the wreck and ruin about him.

Amon Felger had a bullet through his right forearm, between the bones. Monty Spights was dead, and Babe Lewis had a wound that would put him out of the fight for a long time. On the other hand, disaster had visited the Circle H men. Six were dead. Bob Halsey lay in the sawdust, spitting blood, with a bullet through his left lung. Two others were seriously hurt.

"Charlie," said Felger, "I wish you'd see to burying Monty. We'll get Babe home. This leaves me only five men, and we can't face what's going to happen."

Charlie says he told Amon he'd see to the burying. Then Amon and Cash Bynum helped Babe out to his horse and mounted him. Just then Charlie heard someone yell:

"Look out, fellers, yonder they come!"

Charlie ran to the door. Amon Felger and all of his men except John Maroney were mounted. Maroney stood out in the street, and as Charlie reached the door, Maroney called to Amon:

"You fellows go ahead, Mr. Felger, and get Babe home. I'll hold 'em until you get away."

COMING along the street were six Circle H men, led by Curly Jobes. As they came in pistol range, they jerked their guns, and then—the guns of John Maroney spoke.

Down that street swept a withering blast of lead. One, two, three of the six went down. The other three turned and fled, with bullets tearing the ground at their heels.

John Maroney backed toward his horse, reloading as he went. A smile was on

his lips as he vaulted to his saddle and galloped on after Felger and his men.

Two hours later Jim Halsey came storming into Tascosa. Jim was the elder brother and head of the Circle H outfit. With him was his new killer, Steve Leaman, a scowling giant of a fellow, whose two guns were lost in his bulk. Out of twenty men, only eight who were able to ride, besides Jim Halsey and Leaman, were left. These were all with Jim, when he reached the Gray Wolf and questioned Charlie Kelson.

"Hell of a note," snapped Jim, when the tale was told. "Where was you all this time?"

"Behind my bar and glad to be there," replied Charlie. "It wasn't my fight."

"No?" sneered Jim. "Maybe not, but the business of the real cowmen, them that don't want fellows like Amon Felger to run the country, is yours. Take sides agin us, and see what happens to you."

"I'm not taking sides," declared Charlie. "You know I never takes sides in quarrels like this one, and—"

"You'd better take sides in this one. It'll be safe. There won't be but one side to it from here on. Where's Bob?"

"Over at the Ranchman's Hotel."

"WHAT made you boys give them killers a chance?' asked Jim, as he sat by the side of Bob's bed.

"We—we didn't give 'em ary chance. They just took it."

"Whyn't some of you pot Amon Felger the first thing, and—"

"They weren't no first thing, it all happened in one piece. Amon's got him a double-hardware killer, and—"

"What! That's like a dirty, whining, honest cowman. Too good to burn a cow when he's got a chance, but not too good to bring in a swift killer. Never mind. Amon ain't got enough men to pay for what he's killed and crippled today, but he'll pay as long as they last. The dirty nester."

"What do you aim to do, Jim?" asked Bob Halsey, weakly.

"I aim to go out there and take the A F Bar to a cleaning. Orto done it before now. When I get through, Amon Felger, nor none of his outfit won't make any more trouble."

"There's two things out there you better let alone, Jim."

"What are they?"

"One of 'em's Amon Felger's woman. Folks in this country don't hold with mistreating women."

"I know it," snapped Jim. "What's the other one I better let alone?"

"That double-hardware killer."

"Huh. I got a two-gun man myself. As to Amon's woman, if she wants to stay on at the A F Bar after Amon's gone, nobody won't pester her."

"Jim, you ain't got men enough to—"

"I can get all the men I want. Amon Felger thought he was just jumping us. He's jumping the whole Panhandle country. It won't be fitten for cow country any more, if fellows like Felger run it, and everybody knows it. You just keep quiet and try to get well. I'll handle the A F Bar. Who shot you?"

"I don't know. Why?"

"Nothing. I was going to kill him, but if we kill the whole outfit, we'll get him."

III

BACK at home Amon Felger counted the cost of the battle. He had taken on one new man that morning, and had lost two, one dead and the other wounded. Kate was bandaging Amon's arm when he said:

"We can't win it, Kate. We was whipped before the fight started. I orto sold the cattle and taken you away from here long ago."

"Huh! Things like this has happened on every good cow range in the West," said Kate Felger. "Looks to me like you got the best of that fight. Another one or two like that, and—"

"I don't want another one like that, Kate. I can't stand to see a lot of men killed."

"No, I reck'n not. It hurts me to see our men killed, like Monty, but it don't hurt me to see them killed that needs killing.

"Pity you didn't get Jim and Bob and stop the mess."

"It ain't only them, Kate. There's plenty more in the country just like 'em."

"Maybe so, but if you cleaned them up, the others would have a whole lot more

respect for your cows. How did that new hand make out?"

"John Maroney is his name. Why, if it hadn't been for the guns of John Maroney, we wouldn't be here now."

"I see. Well, you sit down there now and keep that arm still. It orto be all right in a day or two if you don't ketch cold in it or something."

THE A F Bar was at the head of a deep draw, which ran south into the Canadian River. The two dugouts were just at the brow of the high ground. Below them, and between them and the head of the draw, were the pens.

It was just after sunset. Kate Felger had just returned from the bunkhouse, where she had been looking after Babe's wound. The other five men were out at the pens, looking after the horses.

"Babe'll get well, but it'll take a long time," said Kate. "I wouldn't wonder—"

Cr-rash! Bang! Bang!

Amon Felger sprang up and ran out, with his arm in a sling. A bullet struck the lintel of the door, just over his head. Kate came out just behind him, throwing a cartridge into a repeating rifle.

There was a steady drum of firing now, but no more bullets came toward the house. They were going down that draw. Old Cash Bynum got a bullet between the eyes, the first that was fired. At the second shot Dave Elgin spun around and fell.

Jim Halsey and his man had left their horses down the draw and crept to the corral fence. Jim Halsey himself had just fired at Felger as he came out the door, when the guns of John Maroney opened. John had vaulted the corral fence and stood in the open.

His first two shots dropped two men, and then went steadily on. Crip and Keno Huff joined him. By some miracle, Jim Halsey and Steve Leaman won back to the man who held the horses and the three of them escaped. The other five men of Jim Halsey's raiding party lay scattered along the draw, within a hundred yards of where they had murdered poor Old Cash Bynum and Dave Elgin.

"Talk about your Indian raids," said Kate Felger, "I been in 'em, and they ain't no worse than a dirty, lowdown white man."

"It's terrible bad," said Amon sadly.

"It shore is, Amon. We didn't trade even in numbers, but Cash or Dave either one was worth a thousand like Jim Halsey and his gang. I guess we ought to have left here, like you wanted to do. I never thought white men would raid the ranch like that. We got only three men left now."

"We'll have to go now, Kate."

"Yes, I reck'n so." Kate's grim jaw sagged and her lip trembled. "Just when we got where we could afford to build us a human house on top of the hill and set out some trees. The best years of our lives wasted. I don't see what Texas has got laws for if—"

"The laws are all right, Kate. They just ain't retch up this far yet. We come in here too soon."

Night had come. The bodies of Cash and Dave had been laid out.

"You better stay by the fire, Amon. It's bad enough to be shot, without ketchin' cold or some other kind of misery in it. I'm going down to the shack to see how Babe's getting along."

AT the bunkhouse Kate Felger found Keno Huff sitting by the fire and Babe in his bunk.

"Where's Crip and the new hand?" she asked.

"Why, John said he was about out of cartridges and asked Crip would he go to town with him, and Crip said he would, so they just tore out."

"You know there's a salt sack full of cartridges up at the house, Keno."

"I know it, Aunt Kate, and Crip knowed it. I heard him and this John Maroney talking. I thought if Crip wanted John to know about them cartridges, he'd tell him, so I didn't say anything. I don't know what they went for."

"They won't be back, I reck'n," sighed Kate. "Looks like it's the end of the world for us. I can't blame John Maroney for jumping the job, but I didn't think Crip would quit us in a pinch."

"Don't look like Crip would do that," said Keno, musingly.

"How is Babe resting?"

"He's asleep. Been asleep ever since night come. It's them drops you give him, I reck'n."

"Let him sleep. If he gets to bleeding, or anything, call me."

Kate Felger went out and closed the door softly. She was range-bred. She had known fighting all her life. Her one dream, since she had learned that she and Amon would never have children, had been a two-story white house on the hill above the old dugout. That dream was shattered now. It could never come true.

She didn't blame Amon. He had done his best. He had worked like a slave. The trouble was, he was not frontier-bred. He had been a good cowhand when she married him. He became a good, hard-working ranchman after he got a little start.

The trouble was, Amon never could put the fear of God into the hearts of the rough bunch in the cow country. He had been too easy on them and now they were riding him ragged. He would be a wonderful ranchman, where there were no thieves. She didn't want to complain, didn't want to make Amon feel worse over the situation. She went in and sat down by the fire. After a long silence, Amon said:

"How's Babe getting along?"

"He's doing all right. He's asleep, but—but—"

"Why, Kate, what's the matter?" asked Amon in alarm, as he saw her chin quiver and tears trickle down her fading cheeks. "I—I never saw you like this."

"I—I ain't never been like this before. We—we're deserted. All we got left now is Keno. Crip and John Maroney has pulled out."

"No! I could understand John Maroney going, and I wouldn't blame him. He jumped into a raw deal, but Crip—I don't believe Crip would do that."

"He has done it. Said they was going to Tascosa for cartridges, but Crip knowed you had half a bushel."

"That ends it," said Amon. "Maybe Keno can get us out of the country. We can't stay here now."

IV

OUT on the trail, half way to Tascosa, John Maroney pulled up and said:

"Crip, how much do we lack of having the Circle H out of business?"

"All we ever lacked," replied Crip.

"How come? You said they had about twenty men, besides the Halsey boys and Steve Leaman. We've stopped plenty of them today. Bob Halsey's down and Jim can't have more than four men left that are able to ride."

"Yes he can. Jim Halsey can get the men from every crooked ranch in this country, and there's plenty of them. All he's got to do is whistle, and the ONO outfit will come a-foggin'. Sebe Teale owns the 'Oh No,' and he's just as bad as Jim Halsey. Sebe's men are all killers and he's got a gang. I wouldn't wonder Sebe's outfit is in Tascosa right now."

"What makes you think everybody in the country is going to jump Old Man Amon?"

"I don't think that. There's plenty of good straight men in the cow business in this old Panhandle, but they want to keep their cows. They know Amon is right, but they use diplomacy. Nobody ain't going to take up for Amon, now that he's down. If he could have won them two fights without losing any of his own men, and could have killed Jim and Bob, everybody would be rearing to side with him."

"I guess you are right," replied John Maroney.

"When a man's down everybody is ready to kick him."

There was a note of bitterness in John's voice.

"Human nature," said Crip. "Look at us. Which way do we head from here? We ain't got as much business in Tascosa as grammaw's got in a baby show."

"What do you mean?" asked John.

"Why, we're ridin', ain't we, while we can ride. There weren't but three of us left, and Jim Halsey will be back in the morning to finish his job."

"I see what you mean. I hadn't thought of it that way. I'm going to tell you something. I never have told anybody, but it can't make any difference now. I'm bad, all the way through. There's not a place I've ever been that I could go back to, peaceably.

"I heard you and Cash talking last night. I heard you say that the young fellows that quit when this mess came up, probably had kinfolks and maybe sweethearts back somewhere that they hadn't forgot. God! How that made me long for the old pur-

ple hills of Tennessee and the smell of haw blossoms. The cabin, the spring, the woods where I used to hunt. There was a girl, too, that—I haven't forgotten."

John Maroney stopped on a high note, but Crip Bonner made no reply. He, too, had come from "somewhere back yonder." Crip's face was seamed before its time by the wind and the sun of the plains. There had been a girl, too, and he had not forgotten.

"AS I said," Maroney went on, "I'm bad. I've always been bad. My father before me was bad. He was killed by revenue officers when I was a boy, yet I know now that he didn't want to be bad.

"Ignorance of the law excuses no one, they say. Seems to me that ignorance ought to excuse a lot of things. I didn't know it then, but I know now that my Daddy was a good man. He loved me, in his rough way. His people had always made whiskey there in the hills. All he knew about the government was that this was a land of liberty, and he had a right to do as he pleased. Nobody claimed that it was wrong to make whiskey and drink it. The government permitted rich brewers and distillers to make it, because they paid a license.

"It seemed to Dad that revenue officers killed moonshiners for the pitiful little revenue they took from the government. When government interfered with his personal affairs, government became his enemy. He wanted to be a good man, but there was no one to teach him how to be good.

"I was sixteen when he was killed. I put on his pistol, and when things quieted, I went on with the still. I, too, wanted to be good, but there was no one to tell me how. An officer came for me. I took no chance, but shot first. Then I told the girl goodbye, and stole away from the hills, heading west.

"I didn't change my name. Maroney was a good old Irish name. The Maroneys were good men, according to their lights. They were free-hearted, their word was always good, and they were fearless fighters. Like the others, I was proud of the name and wouldn't take another.

"In Missouri I worked for a farmer. He was well-to-do and had a son my age who went to school. I studied the boy's books at night, I read whatever I could get my hands on, and learned fast. I began to see the light of living. I had dreams of a different life, of winning my way to better things, and sending for the girl, and then—"

Maroney stopped and rolled a smoke. Crip Bonner had forgotten where they were, and waited in silence for John Maroney to go on.

"At that time, I wanted to be good. I was honest, I worked hard, and tried hard to learn the ways of that better world. I was still a fugitive. I always carried a gun, though the farmer didn't know it.

"One day I brought the mail from the postoffice. There was a letter for my employer, from Nashville. I thought nothing of it. When he read the letter, he asked me if I was John Maroney, of Lennille, Tennessee, and I told him yes. He asked me if I was wanted for killing an officer, and I told him yes. Then he said: 'I can't keep you any longer. I'll do this much for you, though. I'll let you go, and I won't know where you went.'

"I still wanted to be good. If that farmer had said, 'Don't run, John. You've been square with me. Stand trial like a man,' I'd have done it. I didn't know that I had only wounded the officer and that he got well. I was afraid, now.

"I drew my pay, bought a horse and saddle, and prepared to go on West. I was on my horse and started from the house, when I met a man. He asked me if I was John Maroney. I told him yes. Then he said he had a warrant for me, and I suppose he thought I wasn't armed. I drew my gun and shot him dead.

"Since then I have been many places. I gave up trying to be good. I didn't start quarrels. They were pushed on me, just like Bob Halsey pushed that quarrel on Amon Felger this morning. When I came to the A F Bar last night, I was running from Kansas officers and heading for Tascosa because I had heard it was the toughest town in Texas."

THERE was another silence, during which Crip wondered why Maroney was telling him all this. Finally Maroney said:

"Crip, did you ever see an angel?"

"No, I reck'n not."

"I saw one last night. When I opened my eyes and saw Mrs. Felger sitting by me, feeding me with a spoon, I knew she was an angel. Her hair is gray and her face is faded, but she's the only woman that has been kind to me in all these years of wandering.

"I don't know anything about them, but I can sense that Amon Felger and his wife have struggled hard. They are honest people. They took me in and saved my life, which wasn't worth saving. I won't be here much longer. That last mess I got into in Kansas was a bad one. They'll get me for it.

"I never stole anything in my life. I hate a thief. I know the kind that are riding Amon Felger. I've fought 'em plenty when I worked on honest ranches. You can go where you please. I'm going to stay with Amon Felger until he whips his enemies, or I'm dead."

"Why, I thought you was pulling out," said Crip.

"You're mistaken, but men have made mistakes about me before. I'm a desperado, a killer, but I'm honest, and I'm going to do one good thing before I die, if I don't go too soon, and that is to put Amon Felger and his good wife in the clear."

"Why, I didn't aim to quit Amon," said Crip. "I just come to see where you was heading and what was going on in Tascosa. I owe Amon and Aunt Kate more than you do."

"Good. Stay with me, and we'll keep Jim Halsey and his friends too busy to bother the A F Bar for a while. I never let a bad man hunt me; *I hunt him.* Let's ride."

V

CHARLIE KELSON'S account of that night in Tascosa is probably the most accurate of them all.

There was little doing at the Gray Wolf, for two reasons. One was that Jim Halsey had got sore at Charlie for not taking sides with Bob in the fight that morning. Another was that there was really no Circle H outfit left. The guns of John Maroney had ruined it.

Jim Halsey, Leaman, and three others were able to ride. They had returned to town after the fight at the A F Bar, and finding Sebe Teale and his gang at the Broken Rope Saloon, where Sebe always hung out, joined them.

It was about nine o'clock, according to Charlie Kelson's story, when John Maroney and Crip Bonner walked into the Gray Wolf.

"My God!" gasped Charlie, who was alone in the place. "What are you fellows doing in Tascosa? Don't you know Sebe Teale and his gang of killers are here and rearing to take up Jim Halsey's fight?"

"We thought they might be," said Crip.

"Well, you thought right. I didn't aim to take sides in this mess, and I ain't doing it now openly, but Jim Halsey comes in here a while ago, and gets raw with me, because I didn't kill Amon this morning."

"Where's Jim now?" asked Crip.

"Him and Leaman and what men he's got left is at the Rope."

"Are you plumb certain that the Oh No outfit is backing Jim?"

"Go down there and mess with Jim, and you'll find out."

"I guess we'll have to go to the Broken Rope, then," John Maroney said.

"Where's the rest of your outfit?" asked Charlie.

"This is the rest of it," grinned Crip. "We left Keno at the A F Bar to watch things. Jim Halsey and his gang crope up to the corral fence and potted Cash and Dave."

"That was dirty," said Charlie, "and I don't blame you boys for being on the prod, but you're crazy if you go to the Broken Rope. There's about thirty down there, and they're all on the kill.

"Thirty men can't kill you any deader than one man can," said John Maroney. "We're too decent to sneak up on their ranches, like they did. They wouldn't come out in the open and fight us. So we're going to hunt 'em. It isn't against the law to kill a man here in Tascosa, is it?"

"It never has been," said Charlie, "but you fellows wait a minute. Let's take a drink. Then I'll close up. I ain't apt to have any more business tonight. Any-

way, I don't want any of the kind I'm likely to have."

When they were outside, Charlie closed and locked the front door, then he went on:

"Boys, I don't aim to mix in this mess. I've got a woman and a baby back in East Texas, and I want to see 'em again. If you come out of the Broken Rope alive and want a place to go, the back door of the Wolf is unlocked and so is the door of that little 'dobe shack in the back. If you run out of cartridges, you'll find a gallon bucket full in a corner of that shack."

AT the front of the Broken Rope, which was about two hundred feet from the Gray Wolf and on the same side of the street, they stopped and peered in at a window.

Two bartenders were busy, serving the long line of customers. Jim Halsey and Sebe Teale were standing at the front end of the bar, only a little way from the open door. In a lull of clattering glasses, Jim said:

"I tell you, Sebe, Amon Felger and his outfit are on the kill. Amon has brang in a double-hardware killer. They just about cleaned my outfit up. They won't be no chance for a decent cow outfit in this country until they're out."

"They'll go out," said Teale. "When my outfit cleans up a nester gang, it stays cleaned. Fill 'em up, fellows, and drink copious. We're going to ride for a party."

"Don't go in there, boys," whispered Charlie Kelson. "You ain't got a chance in the world, and—"

"So long, Charlie," said John Maroney, gaily. "See that we get decent burial."

John Maroney and Crip Bonner stepped through the door together. Jim Halsey and Teale saw them in the mirror behind the bar, and whirled facing them, their hands on their guns.

"Steady as she lays!" called Crip Bonner. "We ain't got no quarrel with you, Sebe. It's Jim Halsey and his killers we want to argue with. A good place for you is out of this, while you're out."

"To hell with you!" snapped Teale. "You can't tell me what to do. Where's the rest of your killers?"

"This is the rest of us," said Crip. "If you want to be in on this, it's your bet. Pull your gun, Jim. I'm going to kill you for murdering Cash."

The long line of men at the bar were dumfounded at the audacity of the thing. Jim Halsey went for his gun. It had cleared the holster when Crip's gun crashed, sending a bullet through Halsey's brain. Two other shots roared and the two big lamps went out.

Close together at the end of the bar stood Crip and John Maroney. The Oh No boys were in a huddle in front of the bar and in each other's way. Teale was a game fighter and so was Leaman. They gave back, toward the back of the house, trying to get their men in order, but they hesitated too long.

From the front end of that bar came a steady roar and continuous stream of fire and death. It was the guns of John Maroney. Teale's men couldn't stand it. They fired a few shots in the dark, hit no one, and fled incontinently into the street, Teale following and cursing them. Even Steve Leaman, the imported two-gun man, had sought safety outside.

JOHN MARONEY was more than just a two-gun killer. He was a shrewd and crafty fighter, who had set out, with the aid of Crip Bonner, to whip Amon Felger's enemies and make them quit or else kill them.

None knew better than Maroney that only the audacity and swiftness of their attack had caused them to win thus far. As soon as Teale could rally his men, he would be on them and seeking revenge.

Whispering to Crip to follow him, John crept out the door and they sped for the back of Gray Wolf, where they had left their horses. They heard Teale and his men at the front of the Gray Wolf, pounding on the door and cursing.

"Closed up and gone home, the yaller dog!" roared Teale. "He's standing in with that nester outfit. Get your horses, boys. We'll go out to the A F Bar and tend to that outfit first. Then we'll take the Gray Wolf apart."

"Who's yellow?" demanded Charlie Kelson.

He had been standing by the side of his saloon. He knew that John Maroney and Crip had heard what Teale said. He

heard them mounting to ride for home to protect the ranch, and he wanted to keep the attention of Teale from them. Charlie Kelson wasn't afraid of anything on earth, or he wouldn't have been running a saloon in Tascosa.

"You won't get out in the open by yourself and tell me I'm yellow," he went on. "I closed up because I didn't have any business. You fellows were all down at the Rope. You got a right to take your trade where you please. I got a right to close when I get ready, and I'll damn' shore do it."

"Aw hell, Charlie," said Teale. "I'll take it back. Anybody knows you ain't yellow. I got enough trouble 'thout taking you on. We want you to go down to the Rope with us and help clean up that mess."

"All right, I'll go," said Charlie knowing that John Maroney and Crip had got safely out of town.

THEY went back to the Broken Rope. The two bartenders had crawled from behind the bar and lit some candles. As Teale and Charlie approached the door, Teale was saying:

"I think we got them two hellions. I never did see 'em come out."

"Yes, you played hell," said one of the bartenders. "Take a look for 'em. There's Jim Halsey, with his head shot off. There's six more scattered around. Three of 'em was the rest of the Circle H outfit. The other three are Oh No boys."

Teale went wild. He stormed and swore he would never stop until he had caved in Amon Felger's dugouts on top of the rest of the A F Bar outfit.

"Come on, boys," he yelled. "Take another drink and let's ride from here. I aim for this Panhandle country to be a real cow country, and it'll never be that until Amon Felger's gang is out of it."

"Hold on, Sebe," said Charlie Kelson. "You ain't found the carcass of that gent that decorates himself with two guns in this mess. You start for the A F Bar, and you might meet him."

"Go to hell!" snapped Sebe Teale. "That four-flusher can't whip the whole world."

"No, I reck'n not," grinned Charlie, "but he's damn' shore whipped all of it he could get to, about three times today."

"I wasn't fighting," said Teale. "They jumped us sudden. I knew Crip, but I thought Jim could handle him. Me, nor my men didn't know this John Baloney."

"All right," said Charlie. "Go ahead, but you better take a wagon to come back in."

Teale ignored the warning, mounted with his men, and rode east toward the A F Bar.

VI

IT was drawing on toward midnight when there came a gentle tapping on the door of Amon Felger's dugout.

"Who's there?" demanded Felger from his bed.

"John Maroney. I want to speak to you."

"The door ain't locked. Push it open and come in."

Maroney went in timidly. By the dim light of a smoldering fire he could see Amon Felger in his bed. On a pillow beside Amon's lay the graying head of John Maroney's angel.

"What is it, John?" asked Felger.

"Why, Crip and I went to town. We had a run-in with those fellows and Crip killed Jim Halsey, but—"

"Thank God for that," interrupted Aunt Kate. "Maybe they'll quiet down now."

"No, ma'am they won't," John went on. "Sebe Teale and the Oh No outfit was in town and they took up the fight. They're coming out here and—"

"Coming out here? When?" asked Felger.

"Now, any minute."

"Where's Crip? Did he come back, too?"

"Yes, sir. He's down at the shack."

"Well, I'll get up and we'll do the best we can. We ain't got much chance agin them many, but we can—"

"No you won't get up," said Aunt Kate, rearing up in bed and pulling the collar of her nightgown together. "Your arm is swelling. You couldn't handle a gun. You'll be safer right here in bed than up and getting in the way.

"Go on to the bunkhouse, John Maroney. I'll get up and we'll manage here. If they come and start a fight, don't any of you boys try to come in here. I won't know

who you are in the dark, and I might hurt you."

John Maroney went out. He went back to the bunkhouse and told Crip and Keno to stay away from the other dugout, and why.

Then he returned and crouched in a little gully about half way between the two dugouts, which were about fifty yards apart. From where he was he could see the front of both dugouts in the dim light of a late moon, which was just rising. If he had to fight, he preferred to fight in the open.

As he sat there, listening in the silent night, John Maroney was thinking. There always had to be a last fight for a man who led a violent life. Let it be his last. He knew of no way in which he could die more honorably than in trying to protect the old couple who had been good to him.

He heard the low rumble of many hoofs on the trail. His ear was acute. Among the horses was a single-footer. He even wondered who rode that fancy saddler.

A hundred yards west of the dugouts, the riders stopped. They would be making their plan of attack now. It seemed hours before he heard another sound, and then—There was a faint rapping on the front door of Amon Felger's home.

"WHO'S there?" came Aunt Kate's voice, strong and clear.

"It's Keno. Babe's bleeding plumb awful bad, and I want you to come—"

John Maroney unholstered his guns. He knew Keno had not gone to the house, for he was within three feet of the trail from one door to the other.

"You're a liar," snapped Aunt Kate. "You ain't got Keno's voice, and besides that, I told the boys to stay away from here."

Wham! A gun crashed in the dugout and the bullet tore through the door. A man uttered a smothered oath and ran west from the door. John Maroney could see him plainly, but he didn't fire.

"They know we're here," said the wounded man, as he approached a group a little way beyond the dugout.

"Who cares a damn what they know?" snarled Sebe Teale. "They's three of them and twenty of us. Come on. Let's take 'em all at once. All right, Leaman, jump the bunkhouse."

Teale had divided his forces. Half of them, under Steve Leaman, had crept into the shadows by the corral fence. At Teale's call they all sprang forward to the attack. Leaman's division went for the bunkhouse, while Teale and his men sprang for Felger's dugout.

There was not a man of them, except Leaman, who had not at one time or another accepted the hospitality of Old Amon Felger and his wife. They had eaten Aunt Kate's cooking, or had slept in the bunkhouse under blankets that she had washed and patched.

Crouched in his gully, John Maroney was fairly between the two attacking squads. Teale was nearer his objective than Leaman was. He reached the door ahead of his men and found it standing wide open.

"Come on, boys!" yelled Teale. "They've sneaked to the bunkhouse. We'll get 'em all in one bunch, then cave in the roof and bury 'em."

The inside of that dugout was as dark as the inside of a jug. Just as the entire squad was abreast of it, there was a crash. Long plumes of orange flame spurted out that door and kept spurting.

Aunt Kate was grimly working an old Henry rifle. It used rim-fire cartridges and one failed to fire occasionally, but there was one in the chamber and seventeen in the magazine, and they were going out, one at a time, with amazing swiftness. She was not doing much execution, but she was ruining that door as a place of ingress, and Sebe Teale and his men needed some place to go.

Aunt Kate emptied the Henry and picked up Amon's old forty-five. That was her last hope. She had to save a few shots, in case they came in. In the lull, she listened. No one was firing. Where were Crip, Keno, and John Maroney? Had they jumped the job right at the pinch? No!

TEALE and his men started to run toward the bunkhouse and join Leaman. They wanted to get away from that door. They could hear cartridges clicking through a loading gate like a stalk of fodder in a moving wheel.

They had taken a few steps, when the very earth at their feet erupted in fire and

leaden death. It was the guns of John Maroney. They had attacked his angel. She was the only one he had ever seen, and from what he had heard preachers say, he wasn't at all likely to see another.

He took no thought of this angel throwing a mean rifle and an impolite six-shooter, as attested by two bodies that lay on the ground just outside the door. John Maroney's rage was terrible and his fear of death was nil. How he could load and fire so quickly was a miracle. The crashing roar seemed never to stop.

Teale and three of his men sprang around that volcano of death and joined Leaman's group. Of the other seven two lay at the door and five were scattered along the slope that led to John Maroney's gully.

When Teale joined Leaman, the fire in the gully had subsided and there was silence.

"Get in the bunkhouse," ordered Teale. "They're all up at the other dugout, or outside. Go in that door."

They surged forward, the door swung open when they were within ten feet of it, and flame burst from it. Crip and Keno had only six shots apiece, but they were doing damage. Teale's men opened on the door. Steve Leaman's guns were roaring now, and he was a swift gunman, but he was shooting at nothing.

Crip was on one side of the door and Keno on the other, reloading. The thick dobe walls protected them, and the swarm of bullets that entered the door went on into the fireplace at the back end of the room. Came a lull in the firing and Babe's voice rose high and querulous.

"Gimme my gun and drag me to the door, Keno. I want a crack at them hellions before I go."

"Shut up and keep still," replied Keno. "You'll start to bleeding, and then—"

Cr-r-rash! Bam! The very earth shook. Steve Leaman was pouring lead into that open door, when men began to fall about him. That little gully was ablaze, and the guns of John Maroney were making a terrible havoc. He was not shooting merely to make noise. His wild spirit was crying, "Kill, kill, kill," and he was following the admonition.

With half their squad down, Teale and Leaman broke for the cover of the corral fence, their remaining men with them.

"Come on, Crip!" yelled John Maroney. "They're on the run. Let's clean 'em up."

Crip and Keno sprang out the bunkhouse door, and for half an hour there was desultory firing, as both sides fired at noises, and no one was hit. At last, Teale got his men together at the upper corner of the pens, and they made a break for their horses, which were being held by a man to the west of the dugout.

As they sprang into the open, running for life, a stream of fire belched from the door of Amon Felger's dugout, and kept belching. Aunt Kate was working that old Henry again. She was firing high, but the whine of the bullets encouraged Teale and his men to hurry.

CRIP hailed her as the three approached. She set the smoking hot rifle on the ground beside the door.

"They're gone, Aunt Kate," said Crip.

"Some of 'em," said Kate Felger, grimly. "I wish you boys would drag them two away from my door. I don't like to look at 'em. Wait a minute until I make a light."

When the light was made, they looked around the dugout. Not a bullet had entered the place. The floor was littered with empty shells. Amon Felger sat on the side of the bed, his face drawn and haggard and the bandage on his arm red with fresh blood where his wound had opened.

"Are you all right, Uncle Amon?" asked Keno.

"No, I ain't all right, but I'm still here. I'm ashamed that I couldn't do nothin' but load for Kate."

"Yes," said Aunt Kate, "and I told you not to do it. Look at that arm. There's hot water in the kettle. I'll fix it up again."

"Kate," said Old Amon. "I been a lucky man. They ain't ary other woman on earth like you. If it hadn't been for you, they'd a got me that time."

"Me and John Maroney," said Aunt Kate. "Go ahead, boys. Drag them fellows away, then go on and look after Babe. I can make out with Amon."

When they made a light at the bunkhouse, it presented a scene of ruin. Old forty-five slugs had torn the clay floor and pitted the whole back end of the house. Both of the cast dog-irons were broken,

and two chairs that stood before the fire were shot to kindling.

"Gosh, them fellows wasted a lot of lead," said Crip.

Keno was cursing terribly. Crip looked down, and saw blood dripping from Keno's fingers.

"Why, them fellows hit you, Keno!"

"I know it. They hit me twicet, but that ain't what I'm cussin' about. Look what them blankety-blank hellions done," and he pointed to the mantel board. "They busted hell out'n the shavin' mug Aunt Kate gimme last Christmas, damn 'em!"

Crip and John Maroney dressed Keno's two slight wounds, and he went to bed, still wailing and cursing about his broken shaving mug.

IT was far toward morning when Babe and Keno were both asleep. Crip and John Maroney sat by the fire. Crip went to the door and listened.

"I guess they're not likely to come back," said John Maroney.

"Not tonight, but they'll come. Luck has been with us some, but there's a regular chain of crooked ranches that Teale and the Halsey boys belong to. They can't quit now. If they do, the honest cowmen will get together and run 'em ragged. All that's been needed was for some decent outfit to whip 'em one time."

"Looks like we've whipped 'em a little about three times."

"I know. We plumb ruined the Circle H outfit, and we've crippled the Oh No, but Sebe Teale won't quit. Him and Leaman will get more men and have it over as soon as—"

"We won't give 'em time to have it over," said John Maroney.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean I aim to get Sebe Teale. A man that'll try to break into a house where at an—I mean where a woman is, ain't fit to live."

"He shore ain't, but listen, John. "They's such a thing as a fellow crowding his luck. You been lucky. You've stood up right in the middle of hell and whipped them fellows every time. I know who done it. They'd have taken us easy without you. They'll get you the next time. They're bound to know now that it's your guns that are doing the mischief."

"Well, suppose they do get me? I told you last night that I stand to be got anyway."

"I know, but there is no use hunting somebody to kill you."

"I'm not. I have already found the man who is likely to kill me, if I don't kill him."

"Who is he?"

"Steve Leaman."

"Did you know him before you come here?"

"No. I never heard of him before, but I know what he is. He's a fast gunner, and a dirty, lowdown pup. He came here to help these thieves and killers run Amon Felger out of the country. He sold them his skill with his guns, and then has been too yellow to deliver the goods. I know the kind.

"I'm going to make him fight, before this thing is over. Men like him have no business on earth. I'm going to make him try to kill me—after I kill Sebe Teale."

"But, John, don't crowd your luck. I like you, and I'd hate to see you get hurt. Maybe nobody ain't on your trail, and you might stay right here for years, and never be bothered. You know I won't ever talk, after what we've been through together."

"Well, another day is going to be here pretty soon," yawned John Maroney. "Let's get a little sleep, so the sun won't hurt our eyes," and throwing himself on a bunk, fully clad, even to his spurs and guns, John Maroney was asleep in a moment.

VII

IT was just good daylight. Charlie Kelson had opened the Gray Wolf. Two strangers in Tascosa stood at the end of the bar talking to Charlie, after taking a drink.

"Well, it's this way, boys," said Charlie. "I know you are rangers, but I just can't forget that I went to school with you at the little schoolhouse down on Pecan Creek, when we were all boys. In them days, we never stopped a fair fight, and—"

"But, Charlie," said one of the rangers, a grim old sergeant, "the way we get this, it ain't a fair fight. They tell us that Amon Felger is one bad, bad hombre himself, and has got a tough gang of killers that are—"

"Now wait a minute," said Charlie Kelson. "You boys know me. I'm in the

saloon business, and I'm on the make, but nobody ever accused me of being crooked. I'll tell you the truth."

"We know it," said the rangers, together. "That's why we came to you first."

"All right, here it is. Amon Felger if he is still alive, is the squarest man in the Panhandle. The Circle H, the Oh No, and two-three other rustler outfits, has been stealing Amon blind and helpless.

"Amon catches the Circle H boys burning some of his cows, and he calls 'em, good and raw, right here in the Gray Wolf. I heard it. He didn't make no gun play. He just told 'em what he knew, and that it had to stop. Jim Halsey rears up right then, and tells Amon he aims to run his outfit clean off the map—but he didn't."

"What became of Jim?"

"He's lying in the back room of the Broken Rope, awful dead."

Charlie went on then to tell of most of Felger's men quitting him, to keep out of the war. He had told of the two fights he had seen, and what he had heard of the one at the A F Bar, when Cash and Dave were killed, winding up with, "After the fight at the Broken Rope last night, Sebe Teale taken what men he had, about twenty in all, and went out to take the A F Bar apart and clean it—and they ain't come back yet."

"Who is this double-hardware gent that Felger has got in his outfit? Is he a local wonder?"

"No he ain't. He blows in here recently. Nobody knows anything about him, except that he's a spouting volcano of hellfire when he's in action. They call him John Maroney. Have you got that name on your list of criminals?"

"No, we haven't."

"Well, then, as far as you know, this John Maroney is just a poor but honest cow-prodder, that Amon picks up and puts to work. If you boys will agree not to stop a fair fight, it will simplify matters right smart, and I don't think it will last much longer."

"Fair fight, hell!" exploded the sergeant. "Do you call it a fair fight for all the killers in the world to jump Amon Felger, when he's crippled, and hasn't got but three men left?"

"Well," grinned Charlie, "if you could see this John Maroney in action, you wouldn't think it was so damned unequal, after all. Tascosa has been ripe enough to gather, for a long time. I've been wondering that rangers didn't come here and clean it up.

"Now, you two have come at the wrong time. One reason is, these fellows think they are soldiers, carrying on a war, and not criminals at all, because there never has been any law in the Panhandle. The rule has been: 'Get *what* you can, and keep it *if* you can.' Another reason is, if you mix in this, Texas loses two good rangers, and —" There was the sound of hoofs on the street. "Get into that back room, so—"

"Yes, we will! Do you think we're afraid?"

"Hell, no! I know you ain't afraid. Get in there, and leave a crack in the door so you can hear. Maybe you can learn something that you want to know. Something that'll settle the dust before you begin sweeping Tascosa out."

THE two rangers were barely in the back room when Teale, Leaman, and the eight men who escaped with them from the A F Bar, dismounted and entered the saloon.

"Hello, Sebe!" greeted Charlie. "What'll it be?"

"Whiskey, for all hands."

Charlie set up bottles and glasses, well toward the back end of the long bar.

"What the hell are you bringing us back here for?" asked Teale.

"The drain pipe in that front sink is stopped up," said Charlie, blandly. It was. He had just shoved half a lemon down it with the handle of a lemon-squeezer, in case any of them doubted him.

A round of drinks was taken, and another poured, when Charlie said, in a bantering tone:

"Where's the other boys, Sebe? Down to the Broken Rope?"

"No. They're scattered around on the ground, out there at Amon Felger's dugouts."

"Well, I told you last night not to go out there, but you would go, and try to take the A F Bar outfit."

"You go plumb to hell!" snarled Teale. "They have had all the breaks, so far, but their luck won't hold always. I can get all

the men I want, and I will get them. When I go back again—"

"Wait a minute, Sebe," said Charlie. "You ought to be satisfied by now. I've always been your friend, and I'm going to give you some good advice. The time has come in the Panhandle when a running-iron ain't one of the ancient landmarks no more. It hasn't been against the law to kill a man, or even a woman, in Tascosa, but things are going to change. You've got a chance to back up, and live to a ripe old age. All you got to do is take your men, go on back to the Oh No, and stay there."

"Huh. You must think you are running this country," sneered Teale. "In the first place, I don't aim to do that. In the next place, what happens if I don't—since you are so smart?"

"I'll bet you five hundred dollars, to one lone silver dollar, that if you fellows stay in Tascosa an hour, you and not one of your men ever gets to the Oh No alive."

"I need five hundred dollars," laughed Teale. "I'll just stay right here in the Gray Wolf an hour, and collect it. Get you another drink, Chiquito, and then stand in the door and watch."

"All right," shrugged Charlie Kelson. "It's your funeral, not mine. I've warned you, and that's as far as I can go."

HALF an hour passed, while Teale and his men drank and smoked. Warmed by heavy drinking on an empty stomach, Teale told in snatches what had happened at the A F Bar in the night fighting, while the rangers listened. Then Teale began to brag.

"You talk about Tascosa getting cleaned. Who's going to clean it? It suits us old-timers like it is. I've heard stories about rangers coming to Tascosa, but I notice they haven't come.

"What could they do, if they did come? Us old-timers took this country away from the Indians. If they'll let us alone we'll go on running it to suit ourselves, like we been doing. We'll put the damn' nesters, like Amon Felger, out of it, and make it a real cow country again. If they don't let us alone—they'll be damned sorry they didn't."

"That's your whiskey talking, Sebe," said Charlie Kelson. "When forty of your old-time cowmen, as you call them, which ain't the right name, can't whip one man—"

"Now, see here, Charlie," interrupted Teale, "that'll be a plenty of that, and some more. I'm pretty sore about the way things have broke agin us, and you *can* talk too much."

"Maybe I can, but you said last night I was yellow. What did I tell you then? The same thing goes now."

"Well, I don't want to quarrel with you, now," said Sebe. "I've got other business."

"You shore have. You've got more business than you know about, and it ain't here in the Gray Wolf."

"Some of it is. It's just ten more minutes until I begin to spend them five hundred dollars. Open the safe, and begin to count it out. I don't want to have to wait—"

"Aqui, Señor!" shrilled the little Mexican puncher at the door. *"Dos hombres, dos vaqueros!"*

Teale and the sullen Leaman whirled away from the bar, just as Chiquito jerked his gun. A gun roared in the street, Chiquito spun around and fell.

"Go out and earn your five hundred dollars," sneered Charlie Kelson. "Your friends have come to town."

VIII

"HADN'T we better stop that, Sergeant?" asked the ranger.

"No. I guess Charlie was right. From what Sebe Teale said, the whole outfit needs killing. Let 'em have it out. We couldn't stop it now, anyway. Listen!"

"Get the hell out of here!" roared Charlie Kelson, as he jerked two guns from under the bar. "I don't want my place messed up again. You're so damn' bad, Sebe, get out in the open, and fight like a man."

Sebe Teale and four of his remaining seven men sprang out the front door. Three of them dropped in as many seconds. Teale and the other one sprinted for the Broken Rope. The man fell half way. Teale reached the door, and fell inside, with a handful of bullets in him. The other three men, who had run out the back door, met a similar fate.

Old Crip Bonner sat his horse, and coolly potted them as they came out. They had

expected some of them to try to get out that way. Steve Leaman had stood sullenly by the bar. When he heard John Maroney's horse go storming down the street after Teale, Leaman sprang out the front door, and mounted his horse.

When John Maroney had killed Teale, he reined his horse into the middle of the street, and calmly reloaded his guns. As Leaman vaulted to his saddle, Maroney drove in his spurs and charged toward him, yelling:

"Stand and fight, you yellow whelp of hell. I don't want to have to shoot you in the back, and I'm going to kill you."

Caught in the open, Leaman, who was really a terror with his guns, when he had the nerve to use them, had no choice but to fight. He brought his horse around, facing John Maroney, and the fight was on.

Charlie Kelson and the two rangers ran to the front door. There, they witnessed a fight that was talked of as long as the last crumbling shack in old Tascosa was inhabited. Kelson's account of the battle was a classic, that would require many many pages to reproduce.

Charlie, himself, was a gunner of no mean skill. Smoke didn't disturb him. As he stood in the door and watched the fight, he understood every move that was made.

He understood that John Maroney was a man who didn't fear death, but for some reason rather welcomed it. That, perhaps, was the reason that he had escaped, so far, in all the battles they had fought.

Kelson understood, too, that Leaman did fear death. That he was a craven coward, fighting desperately, because his only hope of life lay in killing his antagonist.

Never, in all the wild history of that old street, where a thousand such battles had been fought, had there been such a display of horsemanship, skill with arms, and determination to kill.

Crash after crash of guns sounded, and the thud of bullets, even though their horses, maddened with wounds, were careening about and stirring up a cloud of dust with their hoofs. Twice they backed away to reload their guns.

It was a duel to the death. Both men had many wounds when the third round started.

Leaman crouched low in his saddle, determined to end the fight, when a slug from Maroney's gun almost tore away Leaman's right hand. That gun dropped, but the gun in his left hand went on flaming.

Maroney spurred his bleeding horse in close, fired, and the bullet tore through Leaman's head. Leaman threw up his hands and pitched to the earth.

THE battle was over. John Maroney, reeling in his saddle, and his boots rapidly filling with blood, dropped his guns back into their holsters, as Crip Bonner rode into the street.

"Are you bad hit?" asked Crip.

"Pretty bad, Crip."

"Can you ride to the A F Bar?"

"I'll—I'll try it." His face was pale and drawn. "I'd rather pass there, than in this ante-chamber of hell."

"Send the doctor out, Charlie," called Crip. "I'm going to get him home if I can."

The doctor overtook them, a mile out of town. It was only his hypodermic needle and John Maroney's grim determination to die in a bed, without his boots on, that took him to the A F Bar alive. Aunt Kate saw them coming, and recognized the doctor. She knew it was serious, and ran out to meet them.

"Is John Maroney bad hurt?" she asked, when they came up.

"Seriously," said the doctor.

"Bring him in here, where I can take care of him," she said, and led the way to her own dugout.

It was far toward sunset when the doctor left. He had dressed twenty wounds in John Maroney's body. Many of them were slight. Two of them were deep. Maroney lay in a stupor from drugs. Aunt Kate followed the doctor out to his horse.

"Is there any chance for him, Doctor?" she asked.

"Not a chance in the world. Either of those two wounds would kill him. Any other man would have dropped when those bullets struck him. I've left the needle and plenty of tablets. Don't let the poor fellow suffer."

"I won't, Doctor, but—but I might give him too much."

"You can't give him too much. It would be God's mercy, if he went to sleep, and never woke again."

"Will—will he go soon, do you think?"

"He may go any moment, and he may linger on through the night. That kind die hard."

Tears ran unashamed down the faded cheeks of Kate Felger, as she turned away toward the dugout, and went back to her vigil by the side of John Maroney's bed.

Back in Tascosa, where gunfights were common, men marveled at that fight. They had seen many, but never one like that.

"I'm glad I didn't have to try to take either one of those fellows," said the old sergeant. "They were two of the gamest fighters I ever saw, and I've seen a few."

The bodies were gathered up from the street. In the body of Steve Leaman there were twenty-eight wounds. John Maroney had fired thirty-six shots, emptying his guns three times. He killed Leaman with his last cartridge. Of the other eight, six struck Leaman's horse, and two were in his saddle, just below the horn.

"Every shot found a mark," said the ranger. "There is not one gunner in ten thousand who could do that, with his horse charging about as Maroney's was."

"Well, I win a dollar off Sebe," said Charlie Kelson, as he mopped the top of his bar, "but I don't reck'n I'll collect it. The storm's over, and it is certainly quiet around here. I wouldn't wonder if this is the beginning of quieter times in Tascosa."

"It is," said the ranger sergeant. "Our whole company will be here tomorrow, and will take up quarters until the law is recognized in this part of Texas."

IT was almost sunset, when two heavily armed men rode into Tascosa, and dismounted in front of the Gray Wolf, just as the doctor rode up and dismounted. The three entered the battle-scarred old saloon at the same time.

"We are United States Marshals," said one of the strangers, addressing Charlie Kelson.

"All right, Cap'n. Charlie Kelson's my name. There's my cigar, tobacco, and liquor license, on the wall."

"We are not interested in your license."

"Fine! What'll it be, gents?"

"Is there a man in Tascosa by the name of John Maroney?"

"Why, he's been here some, but he ain't here now."

"Where is he?" snapped the marshal. "We have a Federal warrant for him, and mean to take him."

"You tell him, Doc," said Charlie.

"John Maroney is at a ranch, the A F Bar five miles east of here," informed the doctor, as he poured a drink.

"What sort of an outfit is it?"

"Cow outfit," smiled the doctor.

"I supposed it was. What I want to know is what kind of people are they. These Texas ranchers are mostly killers."

"Excuse me," drawled the sergeant. "Texas ranchers are not killers, as a rule."

"Who are you?" demanded the marshal.

"I'm a Texas Ranger, and I grew up on a cow ranch. I don't like to hear cow-people misrepresented."

"I beg your pardon," said the marshal. "Of course I didn't mean that all ranchers were killers. Trouble is, we don't know. An outfit that harbors men like John Maroney is apt to be rough."

"Wrong again," said the doctor. "The people who are caring for John Maroney are the salt of the earth. Maroney is probably dead by this time."

A GLANCE shot between the two marshals. One of them was from Kansas and the other from Missouri. Neither of them had ever been in Texas before. They had heard plenty of wild tales of the country, most of them in a measure true.

The trouble was that they couldn't understand that men sometimes need killing. Another thing, they thought all the people in the cow country were alike, and were suspicious of them.

They told one another in that glance, "These fellows are trying to shield John Maroney and help him get away." Not only was their thought plain in their glance, but in their tone, as they went on asking questions. Finally, the ranger sergeant said:

"Now, see here, Cap'n. You don't quite understand where you are. This is the edge of the world. Texas has done a pretty good job of cleaning house, and Texas Rangers have helped some.

"When you come to sweep a house, there's two places that trash is apt to get pretty thick: either at the door or the fireplace, according to where you are sweeping it. Texas has had to sweep it out over

twenty-five hundred miles of border. It's blowing in here from every direction, and there's some sweeping to do.

"These toughs in the Panhandle are not Texans. They drifted in here from Kansas, Missouri, and other places. According to your tell, you are after at least one of 'em. All right, take him. I got an idea that if you'll kill, or take out, all the bad ones that are in the Panhandle, from your two states alone, it would help a lot."

"We intend to take the one we're after," said the marshal, still suspicious.

"All right, take him, but I'm going to tell you something. If you believe it, it may help you. If you don't—you probably won't go back where you come from."

"What do you mean?"

"Just this. Texas ranchmen have some peculiar ideas of their own. Amon Felger is a good man." The ranger outlined the trouble Felger had been having, and then, "There's about twenty men lying dead here in Tascosa, and there's something like that many more that are either buried or lying around loose, waiting to be gathered up.

"This John Maroney you are after is one of Amon Felger's punchers. He killed a big share of those forty men. He's lying at the A F Bar, wounded to death. If you think it's safe to ride out there and hail them dugouts and demand John Maroney, tonight, you don't know the Panhandle, as well even as you think you do—and that ain't none."

"Why—why, what would you suggest, being an officer yourself?" stammered the marshal, beginning to sense that the ranger was something of a man even if he was a Texan.

"I'd suggest that you take the doctor's word for John Maroney's condition. Put up your horses, go to bed, and get some sleep. Then in the morning you can go to the A F Bar. If Maroney is alive and able to travel, you may take him. Anyway, you will have done your duty. You ought to thank God you didn't find John Maroney and try to take him before he was shot to rags."

The marshals finally decided that they had no business at the A F Bar that night. They were shown over the town a bit, got a look at the body of Steve Leaman, while Charlie Kelson told them the story of the fight, and they were quite content to go to the hotel, tough as it was, and sleep on their decision.

IX

OUT at the A F Bar the sun had dropped into the plain like a great, golden coin going into a slot. Aunt Kate Felger stood in the door of her dugout. She heard a faint moan, and turned back into the dark room.

"I'm coming, John Maroney. Wait until I light the lamp. It's dark in this hole-in-the-ground."

She lit the oil lamp, picked up the little tube of white tablets.

"Just make it a half of one, Aunt Kate," came John Maroney's weak voice. "I don't want to go to sleep. I want to talk some."

She put half a tablet in the syringe and injected it into his white arm.

"Now, sit down here by me where I can see your face. You don't mind if I call you Aunt Kate, as the other boys do?"

"God bless you, no! You can call me Mother if you want to. I wish I had a son like you."

"No, don't say that. You're too good to have a son like me. I've been pretty bad. But I don't want to talk about myself now.

"When you were young, did you think of things you would like to do in life? Of a comfortable home, plenty of blankets when the weather was cold, of all the shiny pans and kettles and things you wanted in the kitchen, a big stuffed chair apiece for you and Uncle Amon by the fireplace. Some flowers in the yard and rose bushes. Not too many. Just one big red rose and a white Bride rose, and maybe a moss rose. Did you think of things like that, when you were young?"

"Why, John Maroney," said Aunt Kate, brushing a tear from her cheek, "is your mind wandering that you think of such things?"

"Oh, no. I've thought of them often when I was on night herd on stormy nights. Did you ever think of all those little things like that?"

"Yes, John Maroney, but you left out the main thing. I thought of all you mentioned and I dreamed of a little girl with curly, yellow hair like Amon's was when he was young, and a boy with black hair like mine was before it turned gray, like—

like your hair was when you were a little boy."

AUNT KATE stopped as her throat tightened. After a long silence:

"And the dreams never come true, Aunt Kate?"

"No, John Maroney. It seems that dreams never come true. Amon and me had a little start of cattle down state. When I learned that there would never be children, my dreams turned to the things you talked about. We'd come out here and rough it a few years, and then have plenty.

"We've roughed it in this old dugout for ten years. For ten years I've dreamed of a big white house on the brow of this hill. Amon had done well and we were about ready to build when the Halseys and Teale and their like began to steal us out. That dream was like the rest. It won't come true."

"Maybe it will, Aunt Kate, but my dreams can't come true. I know it won't be long now, but I want to tell you. It wasn't of a big white house. It was just a good cabin in the hills of Tennessee. There was going to be two rose bushes, a red one and a white one, a rag carpet on the floor of the best room, and Emmy, with a white rose in her black hair. Her name was Emmy.

"And some times in my dreams I saw a little fellow crawling on the carpet. He had one tooth, and yelled, 'Da-da' when I came in from work in the field."

John Maroney pattered on. He told her of his life. Of his boyhood ignorance, of his wonder that when the law said, "Don't do it," it didn't also tell a boy why. His face went gray with pain, and Aunt Kate reached for the needle.

"Just another half of one, Aunt Kate. I want to talk some more."

She gave him the half, and he went on:

"I've killed some men, Aunt Kate. The first one, I thought was going to get me hung, and I shot him. Then, two who were trying to kill me. Then, I came here to get away. You and Uncle Amon took me in. You fed me broth with a spoon, and I thought you were an angel. You are an angel, Aunt Kate."

"No, I ain't, son. You seen me kill two men. I've wanted to kill before, since this trouble started."

"But they needed killing, Aunt Kate. Do—do you suppose the Big Wrangler, Up Yonder, figures everything when he checks up the account to see what's coming to us after the round-up and the beef of life is all shipped? Do you suppose it helps any if we are sorry we were so ignorant, and didn't know how to make life beautiful like it ought to be, instead of ugly like we made it?"

"John Maroney, you talk strange. Where did you learn to talk that way?"

"Oh, I've seen a lot of things and I've read a lot of things, and maybe some of it was natural. I used to think I could preach, and that I would tell the boys a lot of things besides 'don't do this and that, or the devil will get you when you die.' I'd tell 'em don't and why: because if you do, you'll be in hell *all the time.* But you haven't told me about the Big Wrangler, and I'm getting tired."

"I AIN'T been any too good myself, John Maroney. I got an idea that the Big Wrangler is a fairer judge than any man could be, because He knows everything. He knows how many times we have to ride double-shift on night-herd when it's raining and the wind's north-east. He knows how many bad braunks we get in our string, how many rustlers try to burn our cows, and everything.

"Yes, John Maroney, I'm sure he takes into account the bad things we do to keep from being stole ragged, and the things we done through ignorance. It counts, too, if we're sorry for the bad things we done a-purpose."

Beads of sweat were standing on John Maroney's face, and his mouth was drawn with pain.

"That helps a lot, Aunt Kate, and I know an angel like you wouldn't tell me wrong. The pain's awful now. Give me the works and let me sleep."

Aunt Kate turned her back to him and slipped in a tablet and a half. She wiped the sweat from his brow and in a few minutes he was asleep. On through the night she sat by his bed. From time to time Crip or Keno would come up from the bunkhouse to see how the patient was resting.

Far toward morning John Maroney woke in terrible agony. Aunt Kate gave

him two tablets, with a prayer on her lips. A few minutes later he was quiet again.

"Amon," she said, "you and the boys go down to the shack and get some sleep. You ain't slept none since when. It's nearly morning, and I can make out with John Maroney."

Long without sleep Amon Felger and his two men fell into their bunks, and were soon dead to the world. Aunt Kate sat on beside the bed of John Maroney.

Her mind was full of strange thoughts about the young man, who was in the sleep of death. To her motherless heart he was her son. In the short time that he had been at the A F Bar he had done the thing that she had long told Amon Felger would have to be done before he could have peace, and hold that which was his.

The sun came up, and the light streaming in at the open door of the old dugout made the lamplight pale. She blew out the lamp, and felt Maroney's pulse. It was just a thread, now.

As she turned away from the bed she heard hoofbeats on the trail, and went to the door. The old Henry rifle was standing against the wall by the side of the door.

Two men were approaching on horseback. With the coming of morning the two marshals had become suspicious again.

They still feared that the men of Tascosa, and even the rangers, were trying to help John Maroney escape, so they had ridden early for the A F Bar.

"GOOD morning, madam."

"Good morning, sir."

"Is Mr. Felger about the place?"

"Amon Felger is down at the bunkhouse, asleep, and I won't disturb him. What do you want?"

"We are United States marshals, madam. We have a Federal warrant for John Maroney. We know that John Maroney is here, and we have come to get him. Where is he?"

"He's in this dugout, but you can't take him."

The two officers dismounted. The old Henry came up from beside the door. It was in Kate Felger's hands, and death was in her eyes, as she said, grimly:

"You can't touch him while I'm alive."

"But, madam, be reasonable. We are officers, and it is our duty to arrest John Maroney."

"A higher officer than ary one of you has arrested him, and is going to take him pretty soon. If you are real men, go put your horses in that corral, and wait. If you ain't real men, try to come in here and see what happens to you."

The marshals decided that they were real men, after all. It was an hour later, when Aunt Kate came down to the bunkhouse, where Amon was talking to the two marshals. She ignored them, and with her face streaked with tear stains, said to Amon Felger:

"He's gone, Amon. Let them fellers see him now, if they want to."

The marshals sprang up, and their hands went to their guns. They had been tricked by a woman, after all, they thought.

"Steady, gents," said Old Amon Felger. "She means that John Maroney is dead."

THE backbone of lawlessness in the Panhandle was broken and John Maroney had broken it. Rangers completed the job.

Amon Felger prospered, and Aunt Kate's dream came true. The big white house on the brow of the hill, above the old dugout, was a landmark that could be seen for miles around.

In the yard were many flowers. Two roses were Aunt Kate's special care. She called the red one John, and the white one Emmy. Tears were often mixed with the spray, when she watered the roses.

Strangers came from miles away, to hear Aunt Kate Felger tell of the parlous days, before the law came to the Panhandle. They would see two long-barreled, frontier model guns, hanging in their worn and weathered holsters just above the mantel in Aunt Kate's neat and orderly sitting-room, and ask:

"What is the story of those old guns, Mrs. Felger. There must be a story, or you would not keep them there."

"Yes, there's a story to them guns," and Aunt Kate's eyes would grow misty. "They was wore and used by a man that God made, and men spoiled. Them's the guns of John Maroney."

"REMEMBER THE ALAMO!"

By JAMES P. OLSEN

Cuirassiers and lancers barred the way to Mexico and renegade Americans—the **Legion los Lobos.** But old Zack Taylor knew what he was doing—he turned loose three wild Texicans.

A Novelet of the Mexican War

OLD Zack gnawed at his beard, and spat, and peered with hard, bright eyes at the two men who stood before him. Old Zack—General Zachary Taylor—was sitting on the lid of hell, and he knew it.

His fingers tightened on the piece of paper he held in his hand, and with a sudden gesture he ripped the paper asunder. Tore it again and again, and scattered the fragments on the dirt floor of his tent. Then he turned to those about him.

"There's my answer to Washington," he growled. "I'll move on to Matamoros only when I feel like it. What do you say, gentlemen?"

In the silence that followed, the unruly noises of the camp at Corpus Christi were enlarged, took on a sinister note. The shrill yells of maudlin men, the furious arguments, the occasional sound of a shot—these things suggested an outlaw hideout rather than the orderly encampment of a nation's army.

An army it was, however.

Old Zack listened, and his face grew harder; deep, grave lines were etched in it.

"I admit your reasoning, General," said the tall man who wore the uniform of a

major of volunteers. "But it isn't the question of moving into Mexico that worries me. It's spies—deserters! My men are vanishing night after night, sliding across the line to join the enemy. Already Mexico has her Saint Patrick's Battalion, composed of renegade whites and deserters. And I've just heard of another unit down there—*Legion los Lobos.*"

Old Zack peered at the tall major with one winking eye. "Legion of the Wolves," he growled. "Well, they ain't hurtin' us, are they, Castle?"

The tall major drummed his fingers against his leg. "They *are* hurting us, General," he growled. "Hurting us bad. Sanctioned by Mexico, they are what might be termed an outlaw unit. They murder and pillage and rape—all in the name of the *gringo.* Spies have crept into our ranks and spread the bait of loot and freedom below the border—and our men are answering to it like flies. We must stop these things for the sake of our name—our morale. . . ."

Old Zack nodded. He listened as a high,

quavering yell rose up outside followed by a gust of laughter, and he nodded again.

"We wouldn't have this kind of trouble, Major," he suggested. "if your volunteers were cut from the same stripe as Colonel Walker's Rangers."

Major Castle flushed and fell silent. The recently arrived Rangers had added to the confusion already existent in camp. They were hard, bronzed men, these Texas fighters, and their ways were not understood by the recruits from Mississippi, Tennessee, Kentucky, Maryland and the other eastern states. It was whispered that they were here to shoot down army brothers who tried to cross the line as deserters. It was known that they had already shot down a score of gringo looters—city scum of the type which was to make the coming war with Mexico a thing to be remembered with bitterness on both sides of the line.

The Rangers were men apart. They carried two heavy Colt pistols and could fire their two shots with deadly accuracy. They carried heavy rifles and razor-edged bowie knives. They were hellions, who hated the guts of Mexico, and figured that San Jacinto had not wiped out the scores of the Alamo and Goliad.

Several companies of these men who lived to fight and fought to death, fermented within the camp. Orders had been to use them for scout work. General Zack Taylor, as usual, forgot the order almost before it reached him. To hell with Washington. What did James Polk know of war?

The third man in the tent now spoke for the first time. Tall, hawk-faced, a hard man and a hard commander, Captain Snaith, under Castle, stepped forward.

"A sullen, butchering bunch, those Rangers!" he snapped. "Killers, all of them. We'll have worse crimes to answer for if you send them scouting into Mexico."

"Reckon they got cause to hate them down there," Old Zack admitted. "You might be right. Anyhow, I ain't never needed no intelligence. Let the greasers have their Wolf bunch. Tighten down here at camp."

"Sir—" Castle saluted and went on—"my name and reputation as a soldier is being—"

Zack grinned slowly. "Tell you what, Major. If you feel that way about it go ahead and send one of these Rangers down there. But no more than one. If he can find outside spies to go along with him, all right—but no Rangers. I dare say Colonel Walker will give you your pick from his company of long-clawed wildcats."

"I hoped you would give this permission," Castle admitted. "And I have already picked my man. A Ranger sergeant, Steve Tager. He doesn't hold the terrible hate of Mexicans in the way some of his brothers-at-arms do. But, God knows, he doesn't love them. He's smart, too."

"And a killer, allow me to say," Snaith put in. "It is fairly well known that it was this Sergeant Tager who pistoled those two men in the little native hamlet a few miles down the coast. Why, they call him *Don Tigre!*"

"Never mind, Captain!" Castle cut the other short. Snaith saluted and went out. Castle shook his head slowly. "He takes his military regulations far too seriously in such cases," he sighed. "Those two men he mentioned—I'm positive this Tager, or Tigre, did shoot them—after they'd pulled their beastly stunts on two Gitanas. But given the chance, I'd have shot 'em myself."

Old Zack stared at him with one winking eye. He might have been grinning.

MAJOR CASTLE went to the place where Walker's Rangers were tented. They showed little military respect for their officers, these grim-jawed Texans, still raw with battle wounds of San Jacinto. Their respect was shown when it came time to fight. Walker was in his tent in his shirt sleeves. Steve Tager and two others, likewise attired, big, flat ranchero sombreros pushed back on their heads, made up the rest of the card players.

"Wal, Majuh—" Steve Tager got up, his head brushing the top of the tent—"are we tuh sit heah on our tails an' let this thing go on? By Gawd, suh, we Texans had uh hard time takin' this state. I don't think we oughta sit by an' see it git this name."

"Zack, as usual, passes me the buck," Castle sighed. "You go—if Colonel Walker will permit."

"Hell and damnation, yes, he can go!" Walker snorted. "I'll go, too. We'll all

go. When we get through, there won't be a deserter left down there. And there'll be no spies come trickling back."

"Nope. Just Steve," Castle answered. "Zack says Texans would butcher things. Then—" thinly—"where would his war be? Steve is the only Ranger that can figure in this. If he wants to take someone else, he may. But, no Ranger."

Steve grinned slowly, and his gray eyes twinkled. "I understand, Majuh, yuh wants tuh know who 'tis headin' thet Wolf bunch down theah, an' work back up an' find who 'tis sendin' them messages from this end."

Castle nodded. "And work careful. For something tells me it won't be a common soldier. . . . Well, never mind."

"Bueno." Steve shrugged.

"You may hang," Castle warned.

"But I shore won't rattle much," Steve assured him. He stepped to the tent flap and called out. "Muerte— Chato! *Ladrones—pelados, pronto!"*

Bent, serape-wrapped figures arose from in front of another tent. Tall, slender, coppery men, both of these men. Three-quarters Apache, the Morales brothers, hating the very guts and sight of anything Mexican in the way of a soldier. *Señoritas*—ah, different, *señor!* And where Don Tigre went, they went, too. Government paid men, this pair—showing the way our army was shaken up and distributed at the time of the impending war with Mexico, 1846.

But even without pay they would have followed Don Tigre to hell, and tied a knot in the tail of *diablo* himself. Don Tigre was their brother, in spirit, if not in blood and race. And, too, the sun-leathered Texan could have passed for their own kind in the proper rags.

Now the pair shuffled in. Heavy machetes swung from their broad belts. Knives were thrust into the shoulder harness criss-crossed on their breasts. Huge, flat sombreros, heavily gold-braided, balanced on their heads. Silent, threatening in their very silence, the two looked to Steve.

"Mexico, *amigos,"* Steve told them. *"Legion los Lobos—señoritas*—an', mebbe, uh rope around our necks."

"But not before we stick our knives deep in coward's bowels," Chato grunted. He looked eager, happy over the prospects of a dangerous mission.

"Were not men born to fight?" Muerte demanded, his death-mould face splitting in a grin. "Aye, to fight and to die, taking dozens-to-one to hell with them. *Vaya!* I am ready and eager, Don Tigre."

Once more Steve laughed. It was a laugh that always seemed to hold a snarl —the snarl of defiance which this not-so-long organized body of Rangers would certainly make known, during this war with Mexico—and after.

Castle chuckled. "I think," said he, "it were better for the Mexicans were we to send the army, than to send these three devils slipping among them. They'll be back—but will anyone be left?"

Would they be back? Well—at that exact moment a man was riding from the camp. Barring being brought down before he reached the Rio Grande, he would be safe. For across the river, a wolfish, wild howl would pass him by the bands of roving Mexican cavalry and plundering, mean rancheros with their deadly lances.

It means, perhaps, that Don Tigre and his aides walked to a den of wolves. And they would find those wolves ready!

In the still of night, Steve and his men left camp. They rode the big-swelled, heavy-padded saddles of Mexican rancheros. Their clothes marked them to be the same. Walker and Castle saw them off.

"Vaya con Dios!"

II

FLATS of knee-high grasses; acres of catclaw, prickly-pear and chaparral; a few swamps and small lakes of sweet water. Twice, as the three neared the Rio Grande, they sighted small parties of Mexico's soldiers, scouting across the line.

The first were lancers, the plumes above their steel casques waving defiantly; pennons of red whipping in the breeze. Later a small company of cuirassiers, steel jackets gleaming, forced them to take shelter in a chaparral-rimmed draw. Muerte was for going out and trying his knife on their "women's corsets of tin"! Smiling, Steve restrained this wild impulse.

Muerte grunted impatiently.

A few miles from the river, a small band of rancheros sighted them. Roving "cow-

herders," as Chato termed them, they rode and looted and killed, feverish with the fever which seemed to be calling all men out to slay and plunder.

"Easy, *companeros,*" Steve warned. He turned and rode toward the half dozen that comprised the group. Sullenly, suspiciously, they watched while Steve drew near. They were well known down here, the three of them. Would their disguises be penetrated?

The leader, swart, glowering, raised a slender lance and set the butt into his stirrup bucket.

"*Quien es?*" he called when Steve was within fifteen yards of him.

"*Amigos,*" Steve answered. "We but travel the trail of the wolf."

The leader looked startled. "The cry—you do not give the cry!" he accused, tightening his reins.

"Watch the snake," Muerte warned under his breath. "He makes ready to ride at you with his asses weapon, ready to jab. A machete on his guts—ah, that would be good. Ride them down, Don Tigre."

He grinned fiendishly.

"Agreed," Chato seconded. "Six of them. What six hundred could match themselves against us?"

The cry of the wolf, huh? Steve shook his head at the two hostiles who strained at the leash beside him. Well, it was worth the try. He guessed the cry of the wolf was the cry of the scum who rode with *Legion los Lobos.* He threw back his head. The quavering, eerie call of a gray skulker boomed out.

His hands were gripping the pistols, carefully hidden under his short, braided jacket.

"Pass, brother." The leader of the roving band of rancheros waved a hand. "But be warned. This side of Matamoros, rides the accursed dogs of Antonio Deron. But yesterday, the *buscadero* dog loses his mistress to *Legion los Lobos.* An ugly temper is his, *companeros.*"

"*Gracias,*" Steve answered. He rode forward, but as he rode, he kept turning in the saddle to watch the others.

Out of sight over a rise, Don Tigre chuckled. "I've seen two uh those *pelados* before," he said. "They didn't know us."

"Should we care?" Chato demanded sourly. "Ai, I think . . . " and he began to sing—

Hi-uh to the arm that swings the knife
To the bowels of the Spaniard and takes his life.
Hai-oh to the *machetero,* the hombre who
Slashes the life from the . . .

Profane, that verse—and meant with all the profanity used in the singing. Steve joined in with them, beating time with the cigarette in his fingers.

"*Tente!*"

At the cry to stop, they whirled their mounts and prepared to make a battle of it. On all sides of them they were confronted by men who brandished heavy machetes, lances and muskets.

The band that surrounded the three were Antonio Deron *bandidos!* The fine trappings of gold and silver and leather, together with the weapons and their number, told this. Too, Chato and Muerte knew Antonio very well. And now, as they whipped the leather thongs of their machetes around their wrists, Antonio himself rode out of the thicket.

They were trapped.

SLOWLY, while the hundred or more of his band formed a solid barrier about the three, Antonio rode near, a lance ready in his left hand, a sabre in his right. A brilliant man, Antonio, after a fashion which was the fashion of killing and declaring it a calling.

They rode the highways, damned by all from Santa Fe wilds to Chicomuselo. Gallant, when not cutting throats, his word was good—for he never gave his word!

"Chato, you *embustero!*" Antonio suddenly roared. "You swear to spill the guts of all in Mexico one time. Now—a *ranchero!* And you, Muerte. A shame upon you. Ai, part Mexican am I. But most Apache. And this—ah-h-h! *Señor* Don Tigre!"

Antonio laughed mockingly. "Ji-ji-ji!" he chuckled. "It does you anger to see I know you. Hi, but you fight well. Away, *amigos,* with those playthings. Friends we are—*si?*"

"Thet," Steve muttered, "depends."

"Your pardon, *Señor* Tigre." Antonio bowed in the saddle. "I but knew you because you are with Chato and Muerte. Otherwise—unh-huh-h-h!" Antonio held

up a finger. "You follow the trail of wolves, Don Tigre. But not to join them, eh?

"Good. A curse—ten thousand curses—upon the heads of those wolves. We sing that song, eh?"

Antonio waved a bottle of pulque aloft and his men rose in their stirrups to follow his lead. Vitriolic, profane, they sang. The song ended. Antonio passed the bottle to Steve.

"Don Tigre, you are no enemy of mine. I bother not your border during times of peace, nor do I take sides during these low times. The Mexican soldiers starve us. Hi, they take the bread from our mouths. We must fight renegade gringos for our take. And that *Legion los Lobos—*" Antonio spat. "But yesterday, behind three hundred horse, borrowed from Tampico marines and Torrejon's snakes, they ambush us. Off to Matamoros, they go, taking my woman for their *comandante,* a low one called Banders."

"Pelado—Pel—Banders?"

"But yes, the same."

"Thet—thet outlaw; traitor—renegade!" Steve barked. He'd been wanting to meet this Pelado Banders, since Banders, a recruit of the new body of Rangers, had killed a woman and fled across the border. And Pel was *comandante* of *Legion los Lobos!*

"Why do you not slip into Matamoros and take her?" Muerte demanded of Antonio.

"*Loco*—where should I seek? How long would I be there, until the pack were upon me? No, I wish to live. Some day I shall catch Banders up lance point and show him how an honest *bandido* treats his victims. A woman is but a woman, although Nina was such a woman."

"Mebbe, thet's why yuh're over here on th' wrong side th' line, huntin' Banders?" Steve grunted.

"No, I follow the trail of a body of lancers who helped the *lobos* sweep down upon us and run us from our camp. And I go my way, now. If you go to Matamoros, look for my beautiful Nina, Muerte. We—"

Antonio stopped speaking suddenly. Back beyond the chaparral, on a salt flat, a bugle wobbled out a meaningless call. Horses thundered forward and crashed into the shrubbery of mesquite and live oaks behind whose shelter the four had talked.

Pennons flapped from lowered lances. Heavy pistols boomed hollowly and sent single, poisoning copper bullets at the *bandidos.*

Antonio had, it seemed, followed one body while yet another followed him. A trap—and Don Tigre and his men were swept up within it!

III

DON TIGRE wrenched a heavy cavalry sabre from the case lashed to his saddle. Pistol in the other hand, he turned to meet the rush. A wave of scarlet pennons and plumes and scarlet jackets—flashing sabres and jangling harness.

A cuirassier drove at him, setting his lance for Steve's head. Steve ducked and swung his sabre. The curved blade snapped as it crashed the other's steel jacket. Their horses staggered under the impact. A Colt roared, and Steve grabbed the *cuirassier's* slender, pennon-tipped lance as the man toppled over, shot through the face.

A sabre whistled close to his face. He shortened the grip on the lance and jabbed with it. And he snared the sabre from the toppling hussar's hand.

"Goin' down tuh Goliad!" Steve bellowed.

"—to the arm that swings the knife—uhff!" Muerte grunted, cleaving a lance in part, closing in and slashing. Then he shrilled wildly and leaped from his own mount to the back of a lancer who had aimed his lance at the muscle-working back of the death-dealing Chato. A bowie knife made an arc. Muerte was now possessed of the other's mount, and Chato was safe for the time.

"Hia-oh, *bandidos!*"

Rage-choked, maddening, the cry rang over the chaparral. Too late did the Mexican company realize they had grabbed a wildcat by the tail and could not let go. This was the spot for machete and pistol. It was no place for sabre and lance, within this tangle of growth.

Steve loaded his pistols, dumped a dead thing, gaudy in braided crimson uniform, from the saddle, and added another clothed in gray and green for good measure.

Lances torn from them; bewildered by

the way these devils sprang from horse to plunging horse, swinging machetes that would fell a tree or slice a man in parts, the company broke. Sabres and their own lances drove into their backs. No mercy was given. One by one the attackers fell as they turned to flee.

Now lariats swung out to roll them from their mounts while other riders came sweeping up to drive home with slender lances.

Steve backed his horse under a live oak.

Alert, a snarling, slit-eyed figure of a man, he looked about him. The sounds of wild, triumphant yells and fear-inspired shrieks were fading in the distance.

Chato, cursing a lance-prick that had scored his side, came riding back. Behind him, Muerte sang a wild chant and wiped sticky hands on his flowing trousers.

"Not for all the treasure of the Aztecs would I have missed it!" Chato declared, fishing out a bottle of pulque. His throat worked in a labor he loved.

"*Si!*" Muerte growled. "What better treasure than the accursed lives of Mexicans?" He laughed. "How they run, and fall from the saddle, more pieces than when they climbed up. And now, we go on to Matamoros, Don Tigre?"

"We do," Steve told him. "We mebbe go to git hanged. If Banders sees us in town, he might also see through our disguises."

"The worse for him!" Chato swore.

"Somethin' tells me we better git on across th' river," Steve declared. "They're spittin' in th' face uh our army by runnin' loose on this side."

"We follow, Don Tigre," Muerte nodded. "I see no weapons we might use. The place smells of death. The dead cannot be killed. There are others ahead."

"An' those others'll be killin' us—if yuh don't hold yuh tongue. We forgot, once, an' if it hadn't been Antonio we run into, we'd been spitted ourse'fs."

THEY reached the Rio Grande at dusk, ignored the barges that might have carried them over to Matamoros, rode down the stream and found a place where they might conceal their mounts with some chance of them being there when they returned—if they returned.

Poor but proudly dishonest *rancheros*, they seemed. Steve, satisfied his near-peon garb would pass muster, haggled with the owner of a skiff who finally carried them across. Streets were lined with soldiers, promenading in the evening cool.

Tampico marines; hussars, lancers, straw-sandaled infantry and gaudy-clad cavalry vied with the *rancheros* and *gringo* deserters and adventurers of St. Patrick's Battalion. The three slouched along, attracting no attention from these warriors. Ahead, in a narrow side street, a tall hombre came out of a house and headed for a cantina farther down.

He wore the big, flat Mexican sombrero of the time, boots of soft leather, tight leather jacket and crossed harness. He did not seem to see the three.

"*Legion los Lobos,*" Steve grunted. He grabbed as Chato stepped quickly forward, knife in hand ready to throw. According to the Apache's way of thinking, this hombre ahead was an enemy. And, no matter if one was within the enemy's boundary, one should kill all enemies on sight.

"I told yuh to behave!" Steve rapped out. "Follow that hombre, an' we might see somethin'. An' no fightin'—*sabe?* We ain't heah tuh start this war. Our job is t' try an' stop this desertin' stuff, an' spy business. An' yuh know what happens tuh spies, right about now."

"*Si*—you fool!"

Steve recognized the voice of Pel Banders. And he recognized the bayonet of the old rifle as an American piece. The bayonet came from the crevice between two houses. Now, looking around, the three saw that the balconies and walls and rooftops about them bristled with armed men. A few were Mexican infantrymen. The rest were *gringo* deserters, chaparral rats and killers, all!

They were trapped, without even having made a start. Beside Banders, Steve espied a man he knew had been in camp the day they had left. That man, a rat volunteer, had been Captain Snaith's orderly!

Chato yelled wildly, swung, caught a balcony above him and kicked out. The hombre up there swayed. Chato gained his point. An old flintlock that had been changed into a percussion weapon, boomed. . . .

Steve went for his guns, and Muerte swung his machete.

IV

DON TIGRE swayed. Muerte's machete clanged on the cobbles of the narrow street. The roofs in that part of the Mexican town rained stones upon them. A cobble hit Steve's head, and he fell forward. Muerte was on all fours, crawling into battle. Three men hurled themselves upon him. Dimly Steve realized they wanted them alive.

Something drip-dripped from the balcony above them. A limp hand hung down. And Chato disappeared within that casa. Banders yelled out. Men scattered. Steve and Muerte were jerked to their feet and hustled away. Ahead, as they were dragged down a lane of spitting women, beggars, soldiers and riff-raff, a big lantern burned above the door of the thick adobe cuartel of the military.

A battery of bronze eight-pounders rumbled by; Mexico was bringing up her forces and concentrating at Matamoros. Renegade whites were joining hands for the pickings and spoils they knew this war would bring. It hadn't really started yet—but for Steve, the thing was already ended.

Weak-kneed, glowering, his head throbbing, Steve was hauled before Jose de Mendez, Chief of Mexican Military Intelligence, no less. The court was ready for a hearing. Steve realized, more than ever, that they had been marked from the beginning. Who . . .

Major Castle had said "someone higher than a private." Snaith was a captain, and he hated the Rangers. Could he be the man higher up? The man who—

Had Steve known it, the two deserting soldiers he had killed a month back had been carrying dispatches from Snaith. Another reason Snaith had to hate Rangers, and this Ranger especially!

Steve straightened. The flat of his big right hand sent the guard on his right spinning. He knew the man as one of the eastern volunteers who'd deserted Corpus more than a month before, after knifing a comrade in his tent.

"Keep yuh filthy paws off'n me!" Steve bawled. "No Texan need tuh be held by yore sort."

"Enough!" Mendez bellowed as others sprang forward. A gleam of admiration showed in his eyes. He pointed a finger at Steve, then nodded curtly at Banders.

Banders, bull-bodied, low of brow and crafty, stood away from Steve Tager.

"Your charge, Captain Banders!" Mendez snapped.

Mendez might sanction such *gringos* in their cause. But have use for them—never!

"A spy," Banders snarled. "A dirty, sneaking spy. A Ranger sergeant, known along the borders as Don Tigre. Snaith sent word ahead to let us know—"

"Fool!" Mendez rapped out. "You mention that name no more."

"Well, we knew he was coming," Banders growled, not concealing his anger. "That's all—and enough."

"Are those charges true, *Americano?*" Mendez asked.

"Yuh dam' right!" Steve barked, seeing no use in playing further. "I'm Don Tigre, Ranger uh Texas. What yuh goin' tuh do?"

Defiant, sick inside but never showing it one bit, Steve glared at Mendez. At his side, Muerte suddenly broke into a blistering tirade. Mexicans were goats, skunks, rats and other things impossible to repeat. Mendez took the bait, lost his self-composure and jumped forward. Muerte kicked him in the stomach, and Steve, entering into the spirit of the thing, slammed two renegade *gringos* aside in a rush for Banders.

Weight of numbers crushed the pair. Mendez, murderously angry, ordered them away to the carcel. "No food or drink for two days, while they repent. Then shoot the dogs!" he yelled.

Kicked, beaten, they were dragged out and on down the street. It was dark down this way. The thick walls of the carcel loomed up beyond the filthy yard and wall that surrounded it. They were dragged along a corridor, kicked into a dingy, vermin-infested cell. The door bumped closed. Don Tigre and the wildcat with him were locked in—locked in until death would bring them out.

MEANWHILE, the chase outside went on. Chato, after slashing the sentinel on the balcony, ran inside, found himself in a hall and climbed a ladder to the flat roof.

The deepening dusk aided the gliding

Indian as he swung out and dropped to the balcony of a house next door, scaled to the roof from the railing and jumped twelve feet across a narrow street to another roof. Sounds of pursuit were dying away. It grew dark.

A Mexican infantryman lay stark in death on the river bank an hour later. His ragged trousers and hemp sandals were now worn by Chato. The jacket was gone, likewise the big sombrero. He wore a dirty strip of cloth tied round his head to hold back his tangled black hair. Thus garbed, he walked boldly through the town.

Chato knew his Matamoros. Somewhere down the river he should find a gypsy camp. He remembered that Antonio Deron's stolen mistress had come of the Romani. He hurried on his way, and chuckled as squads of soldiery hurried hither and yon, searching for an Apache in the garb of a *ranchero.*

He found those he sought, camped far from town. And he learned many things from them. The Gypsies told him where Banders had hidden the girl he had stolen from the bandit chief. And they told him also that the Gitano tribe regarded Deron a true gypsy, even as they regarded some of the Indians their true brothers.

Nina, he learned, was held at an encampment up the river, across from Reynosa. There, they said, the *Legion los Lobos* fought and drank—went forth to damn the souls of Mexican women, and lay the blame on honest men. *Dios* knew why it was, but the *gringos,* who were said to be ready to march on this country, could be no worse. They, the poor people, were ready for anything.

Why had not they gotten word to Deron? Of what use? And, too, they prepared to move toward Monterey. At least, the soldiery remaining there were not *gringo* wolves.

Was there a man among them, Chato demanded. Yes, it seemed there were several. One was a brother of Nina. Chato pulled five of them aside. He intended getting Don Tigre and Muerte out of that death trap they were in, if he lost his life, theirs, and the lives of every *bandido* in Antonio's Deron's band!

But what could one man and a few Gypsy friends hope to do, here in the midst of the Mexican army? Deron could not enter the city. Too much thinking hurt the Apache's head.

One killing at a time, *señor.* . . .

V

A BURNING, waterless day. Soldiers and jailers drank at the well in the jail yard, tossed gourds of water on the ground and taunted the prisoners. Word had gone out. Don Tigre and his kittens had been caught.

Throat swollen, hands raw from tearing futilely at bars set in four-foot adobe, Steve taunted them back. Over and over, Muerte croaked his taunting songs. Night came at last.

A few more hours, and they would be marched out, stood against the wall in the yard. . . . Steve gritted his teeth at the idea. Snaith would continue to get away with his treachery. And there must be something deeper to it than just letting men desert to the *Legion los Lobos.* . . .

Midnight came, then one o'clock. A clock chimed. Sounds of the plaza and street died away. Now and again, guns rolled past the adobe jail. Something must be up. Maybe the army was on the move—coming this way.

Steve and Muerte howled defiance at their captors. If they had to die, they would at least see that no one slept about them. Finally, dry, swollen throats could croak nothing louder than a whisper. They fell quiet.

Two o'clock came, and steps sounded in the corridor outside. A jailer stopped before their door. A key clinked softly, and the door swung back.

Steve and Muerte didn't know what it was all about. But their eyes, accustomed to the dark, saw the jailer. He had a bundle under his arm.

"Sssst!" The man spoke just in time. The pair were ready to spring upon him.

"Chato!" Steve muttered.

"*Si.* Here, put these on." He handed the bundle forward. "Quick. The guards won't need them any more. You not hear the noise at the front gate? Gypsies raise much hell out there, and I come over the wall. The guard had a taste of machete, as did two others. Come. . . ."

Heart pounding, holding tight the sabre of a dead guard, Steve walked slowly down

the corridor. It was empty. The three stepped over still figures and reached the yard of the carcel. At the gate, three jailers were growling at the drunken Gypsies who seemed to think they had been called on to play a baile there.

It was ghastly work—but it was war and life. Once more they stepped over still figures, dripping sabres held in their hands. Slowly they walked out the gate. The Gypsies disappeared quickly. A sudden cry went up behind the three. A musket banged. Men came on the run.

Don Tigre and his kittens took to their heels. At the corner, a drunken lancer stepped into their path, his red bonnet cocked tipsily, his sabre swinging before him. . . . The bonnet rolled away from him. . . . Muerte and Steve had struck together with their flashing blades.

They cut corners, slunk across housetops and crawled through alleys.. Always they worked toward the river. Around them, it sounded as if the American army had hit the town. Men shouted. Sabres rattled, and soldiers yelled shrilly.

At the river they were halted. Not a skiff or barge unwatched. They were holed up in the town. They would need daylight and a bit of time to escape.

Chato worked along the water front, holding back into the camps of peons and videttes. A group of muleteers whacked their pannier-laden burros along the trail. They stopped, two dozen in all, at the command of a group of infantrymen. Another group came forward. Steve, crouched with Chato and Muerte in a clump of willows, recognized the Rat, and two more of the *Legion los Lobos*.

"We are not cross the river, *Señor*." The leader of the burro train talked with many motions that waved his enveloping and tattered serape. "To gather wood and to burn charcoal, we go toward Reynosa."

The soldiers passed on.

Chato appeared out of the shadows and grabbed Steve's arm. "Come," he hissed. "The panniers are large, of a purpose. Into one, Don Tigre!"

Steve, understanding, sprang out of the willows. As he did, several of the burro drivers left their little beasts. Ragged serapes fell away. Weapons glittered. The *Lobos* who had loitered near fell silently. All but Rat. Him, Steve had dropped with a sabre-butt blow. Someone chuckled. Steve wheeled. The face of Antonio Deron showed from a blanket-bundle on one burro!

The Gypsy whom Chato had sent for the bandit chief had done well. Smart, sunning brains had devised this scheme. Now Deron and a few of his men were across the river. And Don Tigre was free. Steve picked up the unconscious Rat and dumped him in a pannier. With much whacking of sticks and many full-mouthed oaths, the burro train moved down the trail, away from Matamoros.

DAYLIGHT found them hidden in a chaparral break. Far off roaming bands of cavalry and marines circled back and forth. None heeded the peons of burro drivers, with their stubborn beasts and ground-dragging blanket-panniers.

With guns in his holsters—taken from the bound and terrified Rat—and a bowie knife in his belt once more, Steve breathed deep of the morning air and did not mind that his breakfast was a frugal one.

He went over to where Rat lay on the ground, yanked him up to a sitting position against a live oak and tore the gag from his mouth. There was no mincing of words.

"Snaith—what's th' rattler plannin'?" Steve demanded.

The rat-like deserter wheezed. He was terrified, no doubting that. He answered brokenly.

"I'll talk. Snaith—is aiming to turn guerrilla. When Taylor moves for Matamoros, Snaith will manage to have a company captured by the Mexicans. That is why he plays with them. After he is away from the field, he intends turning against even Mexico, looting, driving beyond Monterey—"

Steve wheeled and strode off, not trusting himself. Now Antonio had his turn. The camp of Banders? He knew it was an old hacienda, well fortified.

Rat talked rapidly. As he talked, the sun climbed and became hot. And the number in the camp grew. Singly and in pairs, men, still wet from the river crossing, crept in.

Steve walked back when Antonio was done. "Yuh're goin' back, tuh face uh firin' squad," he advised.

Further speech was cut short. One of Antonio's scouts came riding in, his horse lathered.

"The Americans march!" he yelled. "By tomorrow night, they arrive at the Palo Alto road, where the accursed army of Mexico awaits them!"

Steve sprang forward. If this were true, he had to get back. . . .

"*Legion los Lobos* prepare to ride out tonight," the messenger went on.

Steve whirled to the bandit chief. "They'll never git there!" he swore. "But, by Goliad an' th' Alamo, we'll be theh in their place!"

A wild, choked scream, as Muerte threw his knife. He'd seen Rat working loose his bonds, and waited. Rat sprang up to run. The knife gleamed in the sun. . . . Perhaps it was just as well.

VI

THE *Lobo* crew moved in a body, out of the hacienda where they had been encamped. Despoilers, turning against their own country for spoils in another land, they deserved no mercy, nor were they to receive mercy. One of the unchronicled battles of the Mexican War was in the making.

Banders rode in the middle of his body of horsemen. A three-gun battery of howitzers and two eight-pounders jounced over the trail. Their aim was to cut in from the west of where the main body of Mexican lancers, artillery, infantry and hussars would be engaged. Their purpose was to cut off the company and guns and supplies that Snaith would deploy to that direction.

Small hills and broken ridges marked their trail. Ahead trees marked the edge of a sweetwater lake. Banders drank as he rode and growled ugly words at the girl who rode beside him. Like a tigress she answered him.

"Wait, you dog! When Antonio—"

Banders picked up a few notes of a song a guitar was twanging just ahead.

> Catch the tiger pull his claws. . . .
> Trap the lion, and tie his jaws!

A Mexican in scarlet rode up.

"No word of Don Tigre," he informed Banders. "But it is certain they have not left Matamoros, *Señor* Mendez sends word the plan is safe."

The messenger waited for orders.

Banders answered gruffly and sent the messenger on his way. They approached the lake. Lances were lax. Some men dismounted while their horses drank. Others rolled smokes and walked about to stretch their legs.

Came a roll of hoofs—the wild cougar screams of blood-thirsty men. Pistols boomed. Machetes and sabres flashed in the light of a new moon.

Confusion, then—with screams of men and horses, the sickening crunch of lance and sabre, groans, curses, prayers—bedlam.

"Antonio—*mio!*"

Above the rumble of Mars, the girl's voice rose shrill and clear.

A huge, machete-brandishing figure sped toward Banders. The bull voice of Antonio roared out.

"Goliad!" came another cry, as another rider fought toward the renegade commander. Banders drew his sabre. It flew from him—his hand still gripping the hilt!

Steve wheeled away. After all, Antonio had the right. A wail—the din of battle—as the *bandidos* formed, wheeled and charged back among the shambles again. . . .

Steve rocked as another horse crashed into his. He swung his bowie knife at a contorted face. A lance tore the flesh of his shoulder, and his horse went down as a dying man hacked the hamstrings. . . .

"Quick—to, Don Tigre!" Chato's voice rose above the rasp and clack of sabre and machete.

"Goliad!" A panting, grunting voice, that one.

Chato and Muerte spurred toward their fallen leader.

They saw the figure of Don Tigre as he fired one Colt, emptied a saddle and vaulted into it. The other Colt roared. The lancer who'd aimed at Chato plunged to earth, sprawling down upon his own blood-soaked pennon.

Like rats *Legion los Lobos* fought. Captured, they would face a firing squad of Americans. They had to die—they did die. A few escaped. They fled into the night.

A sudden silence, broken only by a medley of dying groans, whispered prayers and the growls of wounded *bandidos*. A few men here and there struggled to their feet. Machetes flashed as terribly wounded

horses were dispatched from suffering.

ANTONIO rode up, carrying Nina on the front of his big saddle.

"Twenty-five are dead among my *bravos,*" he muttered. "More are wounded. We must turn back to care for them. Too, I have my little dove. You must make your way alone, *Americano. Adios, amigos. Vaya con Dios.*"

A thunder of hoofs, and they were gone. Chato spat. "Offspring of coyotes!" he muttered.

"Unwanted children of toads," Muerte declared.

"Theah—" said Steve in a low tone—"is appreciation for yuh! What did yuh want them tuh do—pick yuh up an' pack yuh back tuh th' lines?"

"And why not?" Chato demanded. "We might have met more of their unspeakable Mexican army. Ah-h—" he flexed his right arm, ignoring the sabre wound that had split the hide.

"And didn't we get his Nina back for him?" Muerte demanded. "Baboon-face that he is."

They followed Steve off. It wasn't a pleasant place, around that lake, and they had other things to think of. They crossed the river and cut back west. They could hear the rumble of a moving army. The lay of the ground caused them to travel along the route the army took.

Daylight was breaking when they stopped in a willow-studded arroyo to smoke and eat cold tortillas. Down the stream-bed was a waterhole. Steve, leaving Chato and Muerte wrangling over a game of *tepite,* took his canteen and went that way.

Something seemed to warn him. His back itched strangely. Without rhyme or reason, he slipped into the droopy willows. Two blue-clad figures were creeping, bayoneted rifles ahead of them, down upon the unsuspecting pair of loyal Indians.

Their leather shakos, converted rifles and bayonets, and their knapsacks and uniforms told Steve much. Either these two were spies for Snaith, come on ahead, or they were more deserters, coming in to swing in with the *Legion los Lobos.*

Something that had been worrying Steve was cleared up. Softly he laid down his canteen, drew his two heavy pistols and crept through the willows.

The pair of renegades were crouched on the bank, almost above the card-playing Apaches. They came to their feet, bayonets poised for the lunge down as they jumped.

Two shots rang out. Two blue caps left two heads. Chato and Muerte sprang up.

VII

THE pair, already in motion, wheeled, fell off balance and slid down the six foot of crumbly, sandy bank. Steve yelled as Muerte and Chato, moving like great cats, seized rifles and wrenched them from unwilling hands and wheeled the bayonets about.

"Hold them stickers! Don't gut them, yuh fiends!"

Chato signed his unwillingness by bringing blood from the side of the white-faced devil he held down under the bayonet. The fellow grunted and hugged the arroyo bed. Muerte sighed and pricked his own prisoner a bit.

"Clumsy elephants!" He sneered his scorn.

"Tager! From Walker's Rangers!" one of the miserable men turned a putty hue, and his breath came hoarsely. "They—they said he was dead!"

"Hell, did Snaith carry it thet far?" Steve demanded. "I thought he'd told yuh boys I was down here and in on this thing. Huh, funny!" He winked at Chato and Muerte. "Let th' boys up," he ordered. "They're with us."

The two arose thankfully. "Dam' sorry," one of them, a sickly, furtive looking skunk apologized. "We saw these two, an' thought they was spies."

"Though you would like, of a certainty, to have the clothes we wear and dinero we might own," Chato grumbled.

"Where's Banders' *Lobos?*" one of them asked Steve, drawing back from the Indian.

"Be 'long," Steve answered. "What time yuh think we'll be needed?"

"Five hours, likely. Both sides coming up. Why?"

"Pick up them dinky caps I had tuh shoot off yuh, an' I'll show yuh why," Steve told him.

Both of them turned to recover their caps.

Steve stepped forward. His fist lashed

under one's jaw. His pistol cracked the other one's head. Both sagged limply.

Muerte ran a finger along the blade of his machete.

"Now?" he inquired.

"No—yuh crazy butcher! We're takin' these skunks back. They're what we needed tuh sew Snaith up tight. Evidence —*sabe?* Come on, I'll pack one, an' yuh can split th' other'n—naw, not like thet. Take turns about totin' him. Never mind thet machete work."

They hit the saddles. Far to the right of them, columns of dust rolled up. The army was concentrating. These two buzzards had gotten through. Why couldn't they get back through the lines as easy?

They had to, before things started and Snaith pulled that company off from the main body and let a motley horde through to the guns. A small group of gray and green-clothed men came across an alkali basin toward them.

Steve held the limp prisoner on the off side, threw back his head and gave the rising, wailing, falling cry of a wolf. The group waved, turned back and rode with the main body. They were satisfied that *Legion los Lobos* were coming up.

Steve pushed on recklessly now. Everything was moving onto the Palo Alto road. Level prairie on each side—beyond that, the mazes of Mexico; catclaw, prickly pear and manzanita. The course narrowed. Far ahead, a body of cavalry was discernible. The sun glinted on the crest of the helmets of American dragoons.

Not long. . . . Had to get back. . . . "Intuh th' chaparral!" Steve cried.

They plunged off the level ground. Spiny growth tore at them, shredded clothes and skin. They hacked furiously at the growth, fought ahead. Half an hour passed.

Bleeding, breathing hard, they came back to the prairie. A Mexican copper slug chirred angrily near them. Back to one army, face to another, they raced toward the regulars who brought up the artillery a hundred yards away!

MAJOR CASTLE rode out of the swirl of dust over the plain, spurring to the bloody, cut things that pounded up.

"Tager!" he yelled.

Steve pulled rein. Zack Taylor rode placidly up, looked them over and grinned.

"Wildcats?" he inquired, watching a company of regulars, rifles of Kentucky, moving up.

"Nope—skunks!" Steve snapped, with disregard for the other's position. He turned to the Major. "Stop Snaith, Castle. If he's in command under yuh, stop him. Here—" he kicked a pale, trembling man to the ground from his saddle, "is testimony. *Legion los Lobos* is wiped out."

Castle turned and started riding furiously away. Snaith, whipping his horse with the flat of his sabre, flashed out in front of where the batteries were being placed.

Steve gave a wild yell. On ahead, advancing and scouting out chaparral-covered low spots, Walker's Rangers split to right and left. Saddles were emptied as a charge of grape from a hidden Mexican gun lashed over them.

Another charge—and Captain Snaith, traitor, renegade, was but a mangled thing. Hoofs pounded over him as the Rangers spread to give their own guns time and place to fire. . . .

Chato and Muerte strained at Steve's side.

Castle rode back.

"Suh, I'm joinin' my comp'ny," Steve bellowed above the roar of their own batteries, the first shots of the Mexican War in recorded battle.

"What? Haven't you had enough fighting for a while?" Castle exclaimed.

"I ain't," was the prompt answer. "An' I want tuh be near when them Mex heels out tuh pick up uh comp'ny an' battery thet ain't goin' tuh be split from th' rest."

Sabre swinging, Don Tigre raced away. Two lithe, tanned devils rode at his stirrups, their faces beaming with anticipated pleasure.

Don Tigre and his kittens were swallowed in the smoke. Back floated a voice:

> By all that's grand, won't I be glad,
> When I gits back tuh Goliad!

The tiger whelps were scratching their way back to Matamoros, and no Mexican army would block the way, for long.

THE TRADING POST

HERE is a magazine that springs from the romance and gay-hearted adventure of pioneer days when our forefathers carved a new empire from the unknown wilderness. Where else can you find a greater story of courage and sacrifice, heartbreak and magnificent faith, than in those hardy pioneers who gave up their homes to toil for months across the plains and burning deserts. Death rode their trail by day and stalked them through the long desert night. Here, in FRONTIER, is caught the spirit of that glorious chapter in the development of America. Once again is heard the rumble of the prairie schooners, the thunder of stampeding buffalo, the awful war-cry of bloodthirsty savages as they rode down upon the wagon trains, scalping, torturing and killing. Here was no place for cowards and weaklings. This was a job that called for men. Men of strength and courage who were willing to fight and die for a cause. Men of a mighty nation surging westward, wave on wave, a living monument as everlasting as the ages.

Westward they fought over trails lost since the days of the conquistadores. Ahead lay what? The answer was written in the sky. Gold perhaps. Rolling long-lands. Hidden Indian cities. Lush valleys untouched by white men. But it wasn't the lands and it wasn't the gold that lured these leather and homespun pioneers. It wasn't the riches that sent them plodding beside the creaking ox-trains. The thing that got them was the mystery of what lay beyond. What was waiting over there across those mournful snow-capped peaks? What was on the other side?

"The bear went over the mountain, the bear went over the mountain, the bear went over the mountain, and what do you think he saw . . . ?"

It was an old song of theirs. It was in their hearts.

There was another thing that sent them tramping the endless, heartbreak Overland trail, something that clung to them like a burr as they trudged through alkali dust, as they forted their wagons at sundown, as they stood cat-tense and trigger-nerved waiting the sudden shriek of an Indian attack. It wasn't only horizon hunger. It wasn't the American love of adventure. It was something that surpassed even these—it was the dream of empire!

The dream of empire! It drove these people on to face Indians and thirst and starvation. A hundred years ago it was a dream in the hearts of these keen-jawed people; today it has all come true.

To these men and women, these stalwarts of the pioneer breed, who saw the sun rise over the Missouri and saw it set from the golden Sierras—to these pioneers and to their descendants, and to the men and women who still cherish their great adventure, we whole-heartedly dedicate this magazine—the *new* FRONTIER!

THE EDITORS.

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THE NEW FRONTIER DEDICATED TO PIONEER DAYS

Days of buckskin and long rifles, of creaking wagon trains, of blood-mad Indian massacres, of troopers' sabres flashing in the sun. Days of pioneer and plainsmen, days when the West was young—that's the stuff the new Frontier is made of.

TEX SMITH BATTLES "HARD GUY" FOR U.S.N. MIDDLE-WEIGHT CROWN

Plenty good, the sailor from Texas. He could take it or he could dish it out. But when it came to champ stuff—well, they say a fighter never packs the same old hell once he's taken the count. . . . Read RED LEATHER DYNAMITE, a complete novel by Mark Adam in the current issue of

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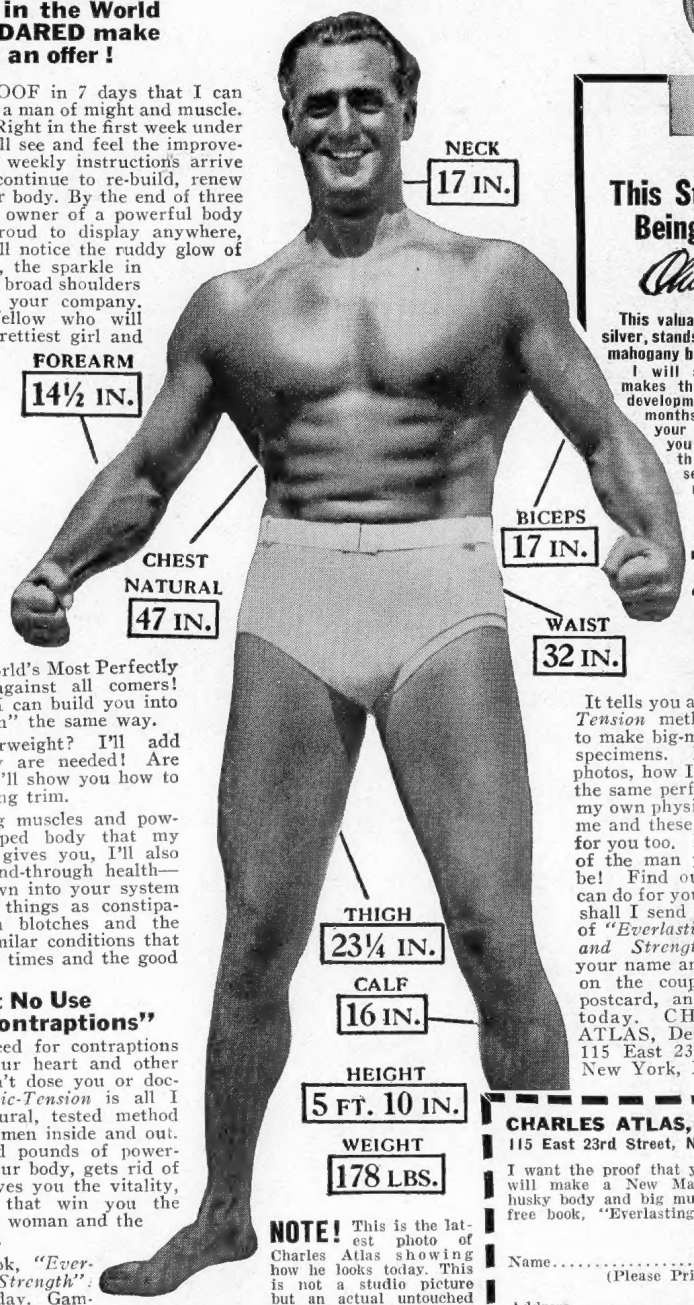

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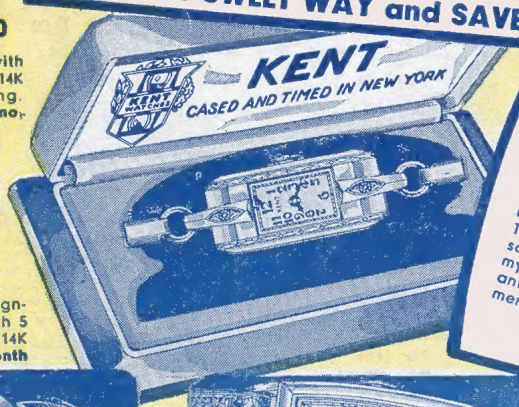

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